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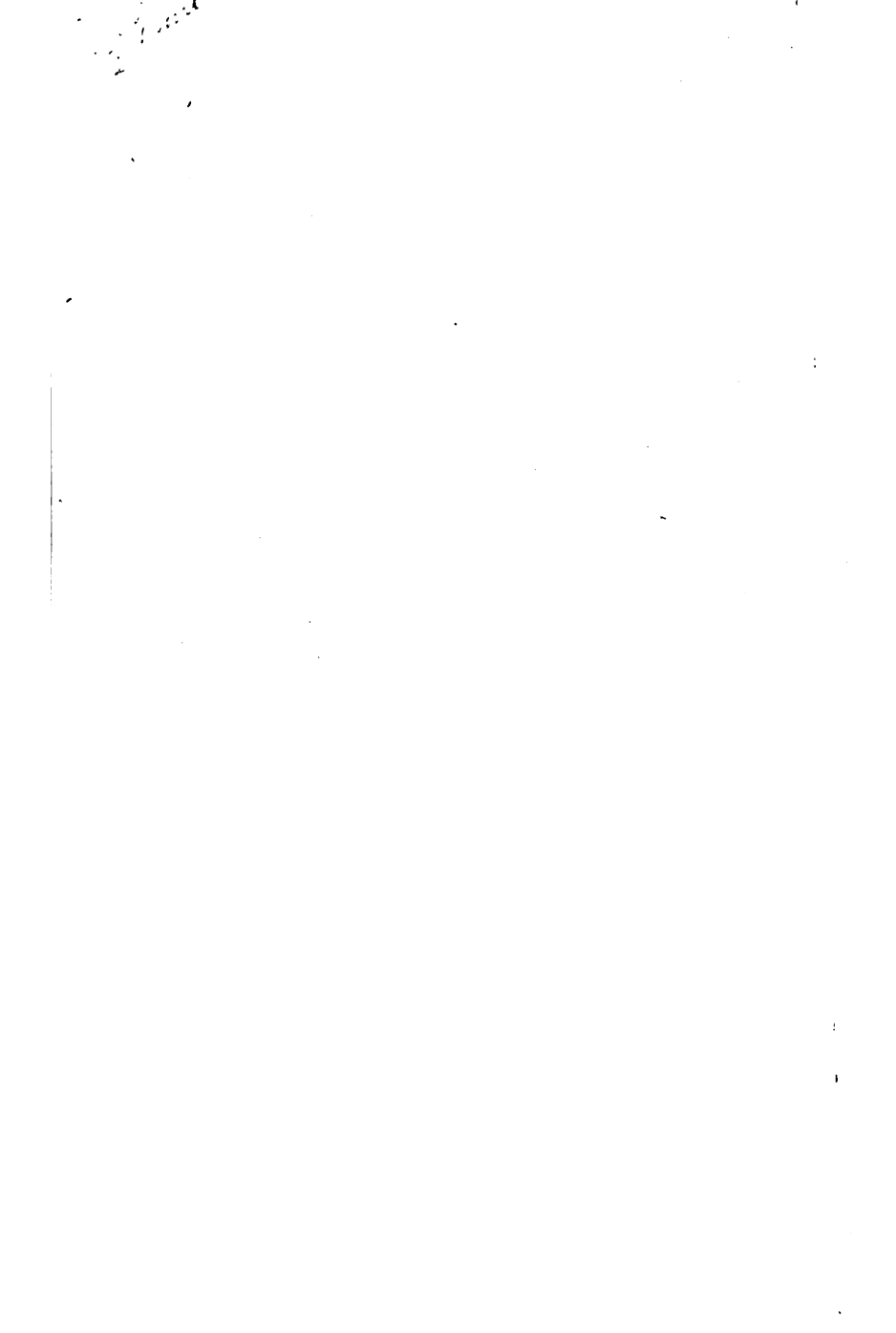
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[See page 257]

WITH THE DUMB STARE OF AN ANIMAL AT BAY

A Novel

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Will N. Harben

Author of  
"The Doctor Dined," "Felix Barker,"  
"The Doctor's Daughter," etc.

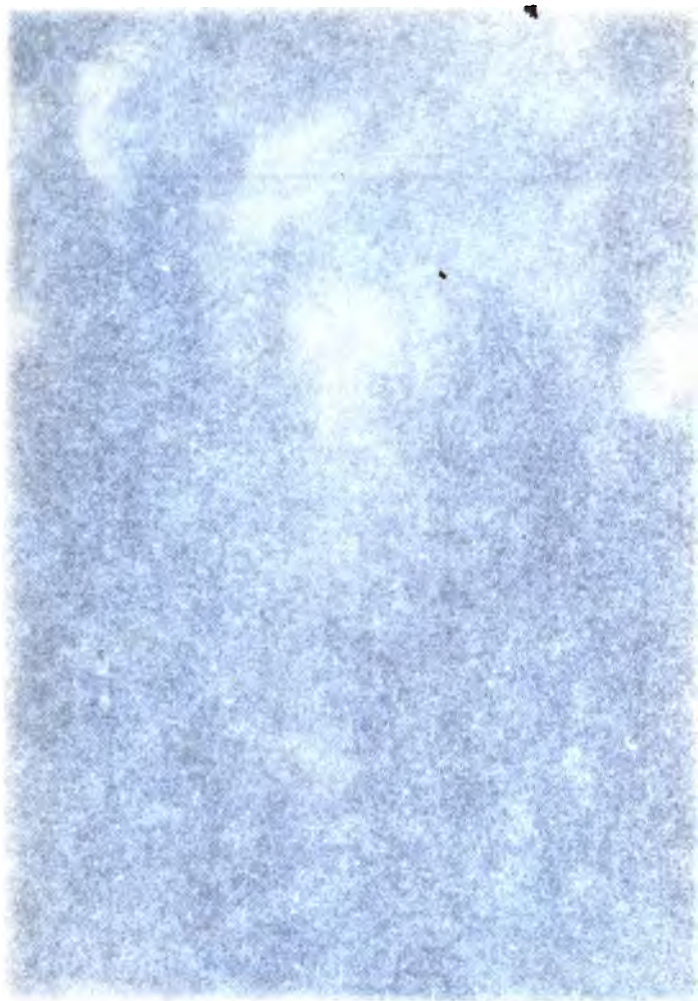


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New York and London

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# Jane Dawson

A NOVEL

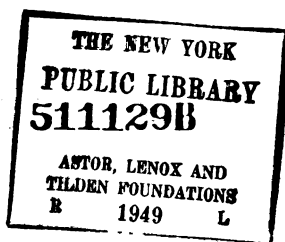
By  
Will N. Harben

Author of  
"Abner Daniel" "Pole Baker"  
"Dixie Hart" etc.



New York and London  
Harper & Brothers Publishers

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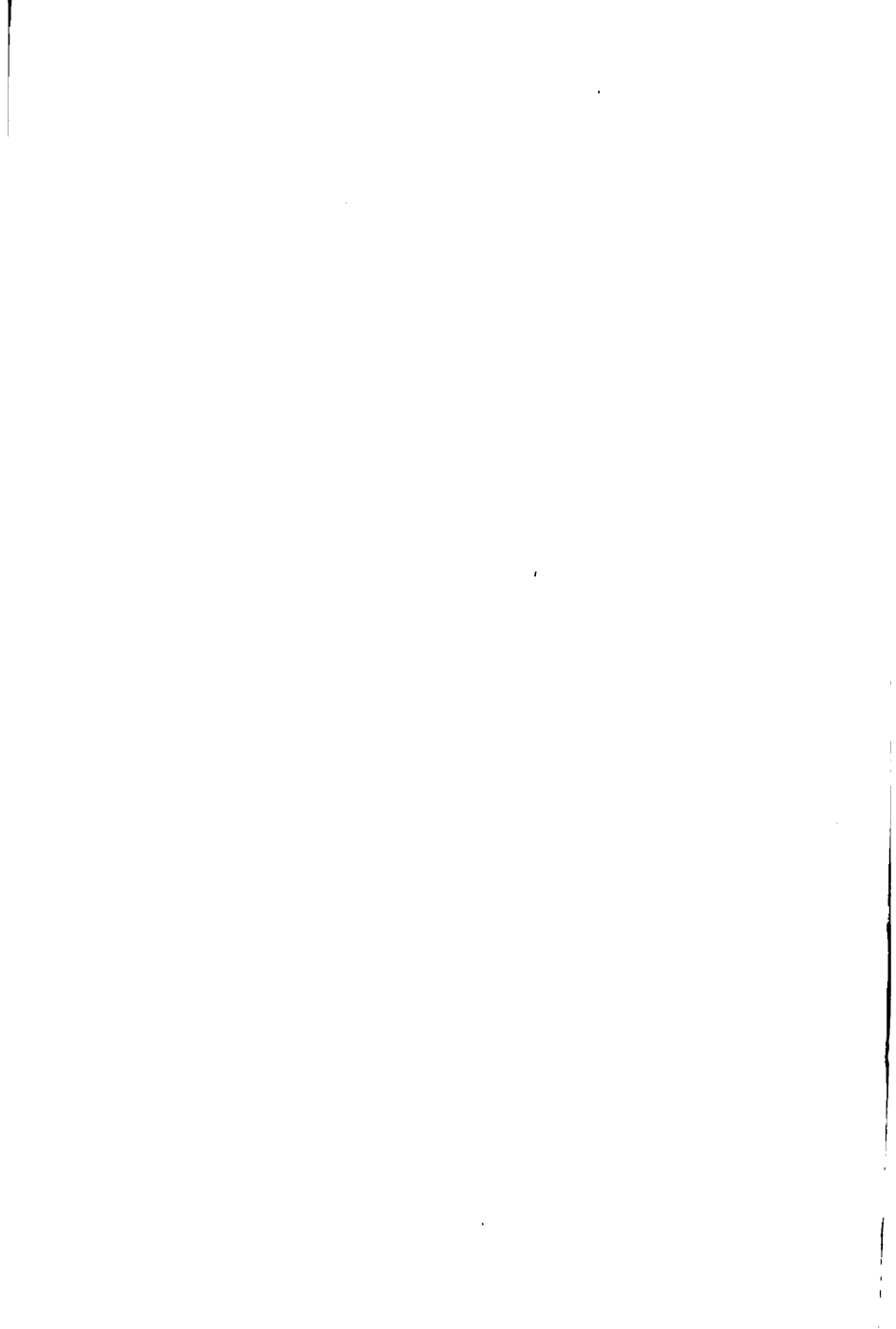
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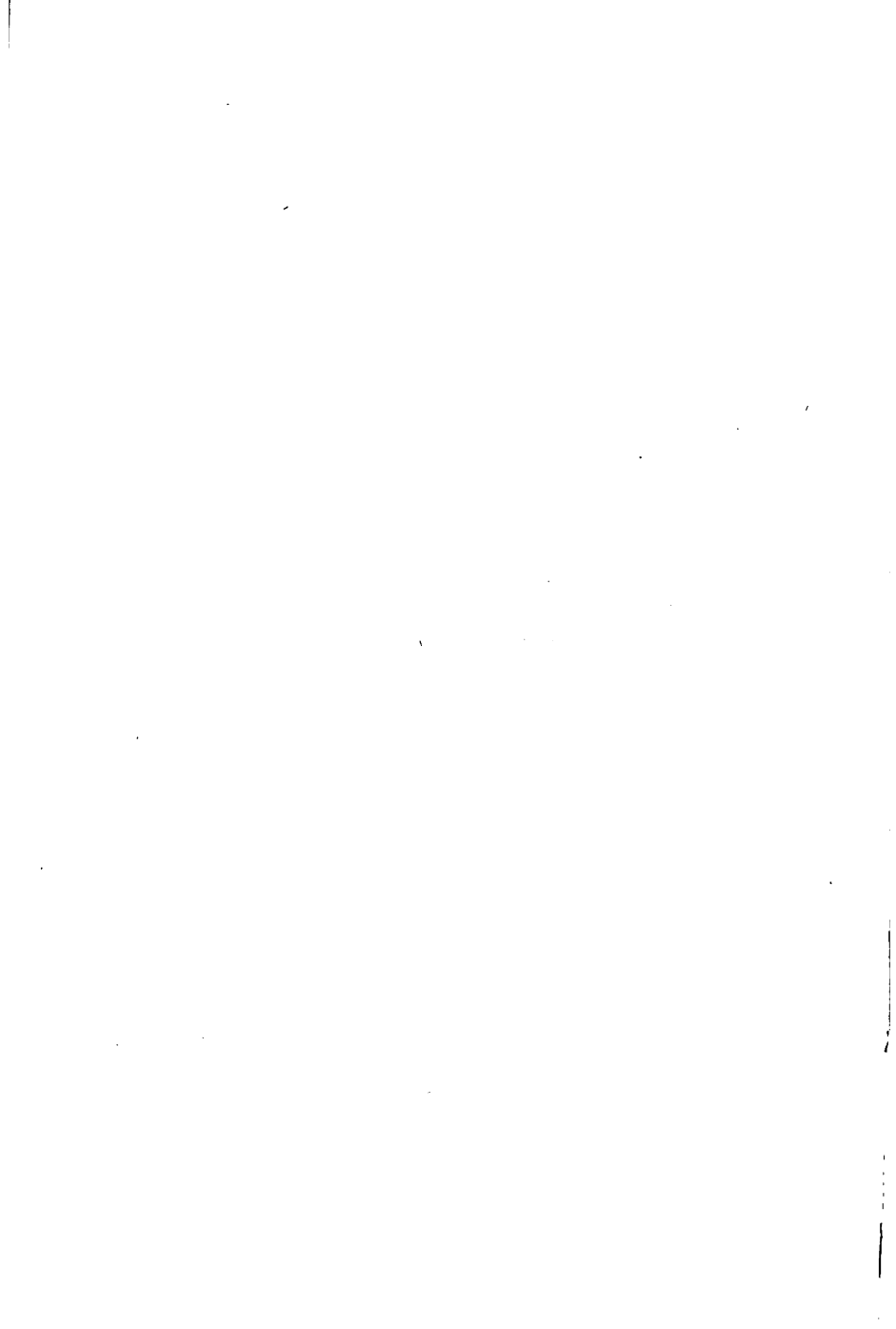
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**Jane Dawson**



# Jane Dawson

## CHAPTER I

HE Cohutta Mountains lay like sleeping monsters under the blue May sky. The highest and sharpest peaks of bare brown stone, the rugged horns of the monsters, pierced the drooping clouds which seemed scarcely to move or change their shape in the all but breezeless air. The eye of the imagination could see the pliant crust of the cooling earth receiving its last effective lash from the imprisoned forces, leaving the half-molten matter quivering, bubbling, hissing, to be shaped by after-ages of moisture, air, sunshine, melting ice-caps, and verdure into its present majestic form.

The young plowman in the field at the foot of the mountain was a product of a later process. He was of a higher type than the men who had lived, loved, fought, and hated on that soil before him. As he worked with hoe, plow, spade, or pick he uncovered remnants of their cruder tools and weapons of granite and flint, and wondered what they had been like in their clothing of skins and ornaments of feathers and paint—he wondered if the spirit within



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them had questioned and suffered as the spirit within him had questioned and suffered. If not, then the inscrutable process was either mindless or unkind, for it had seemed to him that his own pain had increased in exact ratio with the knowledge which had come to him unbidden and upon which he had fed with an infinite hunger likewise imposed upon him. And yet his knowledge had ended where the knowledge of all men had ended. The scientists, whose books he had read, could account satisfactorily to themselves for every visible part of him, as they could also for the substance of the lank bay horse he was driving, for the soil he trod, the air he breathed, the water he drank, but of the soul-hunger, the spirit-thirst, which were more vital to the young man than all else, they knew as little as he, as little as the baffled hordes in the past who had awaited the coming of the Messiah only to deny Him and His revelation.

The man between the handles of the plow had just reached the age of full maturity. His ruddy face, glowing under exercise and flowing perspiration, had a downy covering lighter in color than his fine head of dark-brown hair. He was above medium height, broad of shoulder, full of chest, and strong of limb. His brow bespoke intelligence of a rare order; his massive chin and jaw indicated firmness of will and purpose; his ceaseless activity and close application to work showed him to be a man of boundless energy. When he had plowed down to the end of his row of corn, and with his single line drawn the horse around to go back again, his attention was attracted by the sound of some one calling in the mellow, resonant manner of the mountaineers.

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The voice came from the thick-growing willows and cane-brake along the nearer shore of a creek hard by, at a point where the main-traveled road crossed the stream by means of a ford, and a young man was seen approaching between the furrows the plowman had made. The new-comer wore no coat, and was in the garb of a workingman, and yet there was a certain jauntiness in the appearance of the neat gray shirt, with its full collar, the necktie daintily fastened with a scarf-pin, the easy leather belt which supported trousers only slightly soiled and of fine quality. These things, and the fact that the wearer wore his blond hair somewhat longer than was customary in that locality, and had a face almost free from tan, if not slightly inclined to effeminacy, with thin lips, aquiline nose, and earnest blue eyes, caused him to present a sharp contrast to the man at the plow, on whose stronger, handsomer face, exposed neck and arms the dust of the field lay.

"Hello, George!" the approaching man said, as he strode forward, lashing his legs with a wagon-whip. "I'm in trouble again. It looks like I'll never have any common sense. You may have seen me come down the mountain-road just now with a load of wood. I am hauling it to town to fill a contract at the flour-mill for twenty cords. I reckon I'm a fool, but I drove into the ford, went too far down-stream, and am stuck in the mud. They have been making a new dam at Mell's mill, and the creek bottom is as soft and sticky as dough. I did my best, but old Tom simply can't budge the thing an inch. I jumped to the rocks and got out without a wetting, but my horse, wagon, and load of wood are there to

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stay if something isn't done. I know you are busy, but I thought you might at least give me a hint as to what might be done. You see, I don't want to leave the wagon there and—"

"Is the wood green or dry?" George Dawson asked, with a slight frown of displeasure.

"Dry as cork," the other said. "Chestnut cut a year ago for fence-rails and never used."

"All right, then; come on," Dawson said, and he drove the point of his plow into the soil and steadied it. "I think I can show you what to do—can't be much of a mire-up with a load as light as that."

"Well, I certainly tried everything I could think of," said the other, "and Tom certainly tugged hard enough."

In a few minutes they reached the bank of the creek where the road crossed, and they paused and looked at the horse and wagon.

"You certainly must have been dead asleep to 'a' driven down there with the road right before your nose on the other bank," Dawson said, almost with a sneer.

"I don't think I was fully aware of what I was about." The fair face of Olin Dwight flushed. "I was practising on a little talk they've asked me to make at meeting to-night. I forgot where I was. I get that way once in a while."

"Your sermon may have affected old Tom," Dawson said, with a laugh. "Maybe he was converted, and thought you wanted to baptize him, and was wading in for that purpose—the deeper the better. He looks like a hardened old sinner, unfit even for horse heaven."

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"We won't talk about it, George," Dwight said, coldly. "Our arguments never come to anything, and you are so good at making fun."

"No, time is passing, and I haven't any to lose," Dawson replied, good-naturedly. "I've got my own job to finish. Say, hop across on the foot-log to the other side. There is no use wetting pants and shoes as fine as yours are. I don't mind mine, and they will dry quick enough out in that field. I'll have your old hide-and-bones out in a minute."

Olin Dwight hastened across the foot-log as commanded and came down to the water's edge at the road. "I can't see what good I am to do over here," he said, with a helpless smile of perplexity.

George Dawson was now up to his waist in the stream and close to the wagon. "Why, me and you are going to play a game," he said. "I'm going to shoot these sticks of wood at you and you are to see if you can catch them and pile them at the side of the road. Our fun will last till the wagon floats; then I'll drive Tom out and you can reload and go about your business."

"Good gracious! I needn't have bothered you if I'd only thought of that!" Dwight said, abashed.

"Look out for the first shot!" Dawson cried, and he deftly shoved one of the light sticks straight across the surface of the stream. Dwight caught the end of it, pulled it out, and laid it aside. This was repeated till the load was considerably lighter, then George grasped the hub of one of the rear wheels and gave a sharp command to the horse. The animal pulled his feet from the mire, bent his back in a

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strenuous effort, and finally drew the wagon up the slight incline on the shore.

Dripping from the waist downward, Dawson followed.

"Two heads are better than one," he said, in a tone that was half apologetic for the jests he had been indulging in.

"Well, mine is a cabbage-head when it comes to anything of a practical nature," Olin Dwight quoted. "I suppose that's why I never had any turn for farming like the rest of you. Well, every man to his bent, George, and I know that I am cut out for a minister of the Gospel. Since I've been old enough to see my duty I have thought of nothing else. It was what my mother always wanted and prayed for."

"So you really intend to put that through?" Dawson said, almost contemptuously.

"If the Lord will let me," Dwight answered, firmly, the light of his purpose burning fiercely in his frank eyes. "I am laying aside every dollar I make at this sort of work. It is slow, but I'll win in the end. I think I can save enough in two years to go to college. My father is bitterly opposed to it, and refuses to advance a cent, but my mother is working her fingers to the bone."

"And all that you may learn silly, childish things and teach them to grown-up people who but for such as you would use their brains as I am using mine—in reading books full of advanced thought. You may think I am harsh, Olin, in disagreeing with you, but you seem horribly wrong—you and all the rest. If they would follow the teachings of Christ, I'd be

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the first to join them, but they don't—not one of them. They backbite; they slander; they envy; they hate one another like snakes; they have no charity—their very struggling for redemption is nothing but greed so deep set that they want to take it into another life with them.”

Olin Dwight was raising a dripping stick of wood to the wagon, and as he carefully put it in place he smiled in a faint, baffled way.

“I can't talk with you at all,” he said. “You see, you abuse the things which are my very life, the air I breathe, the food that nourishes my soul—the things which make me so happy that at times I can hardly speak. There are moments when I feel like flying through the air. Oh, George, I have found the way—the only way to peace of mind and uplift of soul. You have simply missed it. I have heard you say you were not happy, and I cannot wonder at it. Any one can look at your face and know that something is wrong with you. You are staying away from church when everybody else goes, and is benefited socially and spiritually by it. You are becoming unpopular in advancing views which are so—so heretical. George, young as you are, you never would have been that way if you had been brought up differently. I am sure your mother started you to thinking as you do.”

“She did, and she has a big brain, and it is all her own,” Dawson retorted, sharply. “The way she has been treated by your narrow-mouthed gang has opened her eyes to the shallowness of their pretensions. Did the followers of the great Teacher they pretend to worship take pity on her when she was

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friendless and in need? No, they drew their sanctified garments aside and walked by with their noses in the air. That caused her, in self-defense, to seek for the truth. She found as much of it as is to be found, and she taught me to think for myself. I know what she is at heart if you don't, and her religion is good enough for me. I expect to live and die by it."

The wood had been replaced on the wagon and, whip and reins in hand, young Dwight proceeded to drive on.

"We simply must stop these arguments," he said, with a friendly smile. "You have done me many a good turn, George—like this to-day—and I shall always be your friend and your mother's. I see the faults of my people as well as you do, and I intend to do my best to set them right. My friend, as sure as that sun is above us I have been called by God to the work that is before me. I have heard His still, soft command hundreds of times, and I'll obey. There is one thing you can't prevent me from doing—even by argument—and that is praying for you. George, I am going to pray that you may be blessed with understanding and have the happiness you deserve. You are on the wrong road—it can lead you to nothing but despair. No young man can live in a community like this and hold the views you hold. Surely you can see that. I like you—I love you as an old playmate and a brother, but, George, I cannot stand quietly by and see you teaching the young the awful things you believe. It would be worse than allowing a man to give morphine to boys and girls. Well, I must be going. Good-by. I'll not forget your

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kindness. You say some of my people hate one another—well, I'll never hate anybody, certainly not you."

Dawson waited till the wagon had started, and then he crossed the foot-log and climbed over the fence into his field.

"Good-hearted, fanatical fool!" he mused. "Well, he is taking the easy road through life. If he does get into the ministry, the brethren will keep him well fed and clothed. He'll climb, too. He believes the whole thing, lock, stock, and barrel, and he has the gift of gab, a flashing eye, and a ringing voice. He's right about me, in one way; I'll never gain anything by telling what I know. It only makes them hate me, but I don't care. I'll give them the truth as I see it if I die for it."



## CHAPTER II

HE sun went down behind the mountain; the air grew cooler, and the gray edge of the thickening darkness crept across the fields. The sounds which accompanied the pastoral gloaming awoke to life. Mellow voices were calling to mooing cattle and grunting swine; dogs were barking; sheep-bells were clanking; cocks were crowing; farmers were singing and whistling as they trudged homeward from the fields carrying their dinner-pails and water-jugs.

Leaving his plow in a furrow near the creek, George Dawson mounted his horse, using the looped trace-chains for stirrups. The tired beast needed no guiding rein, and took the shortest way home across the soggy meadow, once a swamp, where the brown-tipped bulrushes grew stark and straight in the rich, black loam. The horse bore his master to the log stable which stood a hundred yards nearer to the field than the one-storied farm-house. George dismounted, and, leading the animal into a stall, he took off the harness, and from the loft overhead he drew down some corn and fodder. Suddenly he heard voices raised as if in anger in the cow-lot behind the stable, and, looking through a crack between the logs of the wall, he saw his mother stand-

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ing near her brindle cow, a milk-pail in her hand, and at the rail fence of the lot stood another woman. It was Mrs. Dwight, the doting parent of the young candidate for the ministry. She was short and heavy-set. As her fat white hand, with its plain gold rings, clutched the top rail of the fence she spoke in harsh, crisp tones.

"You know the big revival begins to-night, Jane Dawson. You don't have to be told; but I felt that it was my duty to God to remind you, and give you another chance to do your duty to the community you live in. You know as well as I do that you ought to go and lead a different life. You ought to lay aside prejudice and hate and beg God's forgiveness and start anew. The whole thing was your fault, and you know it—nobody else was to blame."

Shocked and chilled to the core of his being, George Dawson pressed his face so close to the crack that the bark on the logs sank into his forehead. The failure on the part of his mother to speak at once told him, who knew her so well, of the pent-up storm that would soon break. He saw Jane lower the pail to the ground and draw her tall, gaunt form erect.

"You are a purty thing!" came cold and harsh from Jane's lips, "to bring holy messages to any one. Huh! your fat, wobbling body right now fairly drips with the slime of hell. Your tongue is forked and full of venom. You ain't here to do me no good turn. I know you. You are the foulest snake that ever coiled under weeds and grass to strike the helpless. A lot of good your prayers and psalm-singing will do you in this life or any other!"

## Jane Dawson

"No fallen woman can criticise me or my acts," retorted the shape at the fence. "God is my Judge, not you. I am not mad—you couldn't make me mad. I came to you because I felt it to be my duty to God and my religion. My boy is to speak to-night, and—"

"Yes, that's it—you let the cat out then, you hussy!" Jane Dawson broke in, fiercely. "I see clean through you, fat and puffy as you are. You think it will worry me to see your boy become a preacher and gad about while mine has to work like a nigger in the fields. Le'me tell you, Sarah Dwight, you may put Olin there, but he'll never amount to a hill of beans among men of brains and progress. You think his speech to-night will worry me. Huh! do you reckon I'd want a boy with a head like mine has on his broad shoulders to spend his days teaching stuff I wouldn't learn to a crazy baby? I've laughed till I was tired over Olin's arguments at my house. George would knock out his statements as fast as he'd make 'em. Olin couldn't give a reason for a thing. Black was white with him, and Jonah swallowed the whale without salt or pepper. Put 'im into the pulpit. Yes, by all means put him there. Let 'im yell his lungs out, and what will it all amount to—nothing but that he will be the laughing-stock of all *thinking* people."

"I didn't come here to quarrel with you," Mrs. Dwight said, almost with a hiss. "I've told you what my object was. I can't expect a poor, degraded outcast like you to approve of anything that is decent. After all, what else could you do with your boy? Folks say you haven't even told him

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who his father is. You have not only brought him into the world without a name, but you have robbed him of the religion he was entitled to. You've made him an infidel to gratify your spite against holy people who would not endorse your conduct. Take that and make the best of it, Jane Dawson; it's what I've wanted to say to you for a long time. Good-night."

George Dawson saw the speaker moving away in the half-darkness. He heard his mother catch her breath and utter a groan of impotent rage.

"You—you meddlesome hypocrite!" Jane cried.

"If you was not such a coward and sneak I'd climb that fence and jerk every rag from your filthy carcass. You—you'd better run, you wife of a fool and mammy of an idiot! I—" But the fleeing form had blended into the dusky background. Jane stood like a pillar of stone, her thin, bare arms akimbo, her pail at her feet, her head thrown back. Her son could hear her deep breathing. For fully three minutes Jane did not move. Suddenly a sound fell on her ear that caused her to whirl sharply about and stare in a startled way in her son's direction. The sound was that made by his horse in gnawing the corn grains from the cob against the resounding trough. The next instant she had picked up her pail and was striding toward the stable, a look of anxious inquiry clutching her features. There was nothing for him to do but to show himself. They met at the threshold of the low doorway.

"Is—is that you? Was—was you—?" Her voice left her, and she simply stood panting, her hand on her breast.

## Jane Dawson

"Yes, I was feeding," he answered.

There was a piteous glare in her eyes. He saw her thin lips trembling and twitching. She made an effort to smile indifferently, but, realizing the sheer inadequacy of the subterfuge, she allowed the frail pretense to fade from her rigid face.

"You—you heard what she said—you know you did!" Jane spoke firmly, as if to forestall the denial which she felt would be the outcome of his torn sympathies.

"Oh, I heard you two quarreling," he said, feebly. "I knew you had no use for each other, and was not surprised to hear—"

"Stop! Listen to me!" Jane broke in, with a little gurgle in her throat like a suppressed sob. "She mentioned a—a matter that has never yet come up between you and me, and I might as well—we might as well—but never mind; this ain't no place to talk. I'll finish milchin'. You go on to the house and tote in some stove wood. I'll come right on. Get ready for your supper. It's all cooked and nothing to do but to take it up and lay it on the table. We'll talk it over after supper, but not now—not right at this minute."

"We needn't talk about it *at all*." He was valiantly trying to comfort her. He laid his hand on her shoulder and was drawing her gaunt form to him when she drew back almost coldly, and so suddenly that the empty tin pail on her arm rang against the door-frame.

"Don't do that!" she cried. "Don't put on, or pretend. It won't do a bit o' good—nothing can take the sting of that woman's tongue away. She

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meant it to hurt. She's chuckling in glee at this minute. Go on and do as I tell you. I'll come as soon as I get through here."

There was nothing for him to do but obey, for she had gone to the cow and crouched down by the animal's flanks. Hearing the milk spurting into the pail, he turned up the path to the house. Going to the wood-pile at the end of the yard, he filled his arms with the sticks and bore them into the kitchen. Then he went to his room adjoining that of his mother's and bathed his face and hands and brushed his hair. The room, as shown by the candle-light, was meagerly furnished. There was no carpet, rugs, or mats on the floor; a rough bed in a corner under snowy coverings, and with great downy pillows, had a soft and restful look. There was an old-fashioned hair trunk near the chimney; a bureau against the wall; a deal table in the center of the room fairly well filled with books, magazines, and papers. The walls of the room were white, the wooden ceiling was sky-blue. He removed his candle from the bureau to the table. There was a thing he had intended to look up in one of his books, a thing which haunted him vaguely. He tried to recall it now, but it eluded him. He could think only of the words he had just overheard, and their blighting effect on the grim and suffering recipient. Seated at the table, he aimlessly turned the pages of a book; he heard his mother's shambling step as she entered the kitchen—a clatter of pans and dishes, and then her hesitating voice calling him.

He found the dining-room darker than was usual at the supper hour. The red tip on a smoking

## Jane Dawson

candle-wick on the table showed that she had extinguished it. She had lighted some pieces of pine in the wide, brick fireplace, and a red blaze, interwoven with twisting snakes of smoke, threw a flickering glow over the room. Above, from the dingy, time-stained rafters, hung bunches of dried pepper-pods, herbs for medicinal uses, hams, shoulders, and sides of seasoned pork, cast-off garments, and remnants of tools, bits of rusty chains, and scraps of harness.

They ate in silence. He had a lusty appetite, and, despite his perturbation, he enjoyed the food she had prepared for him. She scarcely touched the things on her plate, daintily munching a piece of bread and raising her cup to sip from it when he looked at her.

When the meal was over and he had risen to leave the table she put out her hand impulsively and gulped, as she swallowed the food which seemed to stick in her throat.

"Set down—set down," she faltered. "I've got some'n' to—to say. I—" Her glance went to the fireplace, where the pine was suddenly blazing more brightly, and she shaded the side of her face with gnarled and knotted fingers. She paused for a moment, then she added: "No, you go on out to the front and smoke. I'll wash the dishes and come out there. I've got some'n' to say that I just must say, or—or it will kill me. I've been puttin' it off—year after year I've put it off. It's some'n' you ought to know now that you are as old as you are."

"If it is anything about what that meddlesome


## Jane Dawson

woman was saying just now," he faltered, as, red in the face, he leaned heavily on the back of his chair, "why, you might as well cut it out. I don't care—"

"You go on and wait," she broke in. "I'll be there in a few minutes."



### CHAPTER III

E hesitated a moment, then turned away. As he strode through the sitting-room his steps rang harshly on the smooth, bare floor. He crossed the little vine-grown porch and stepped down upon the grass in the yard. There was no moon in sight, but the coming stars in the darksome void overhead faintly lighted the scene—the apple orchard on the right, the stretch of meadowland to the left, and the half-street, half-road which led by the neighboring farm-houses to the village of Shelby, the scattering lights of which showed just around the bend of the way. There were some crude, hand-made chairs on the grass, and George took one of them and got out his pipe and filled it with tobacco. He could see the drab, drooping figure of his mother as it moved now and then past the unshaded kitchen window. Suddenly the stillness of the hour was broken by the clanging of the cast-iron bell at the village church. It rang vigorously, as if the ringer were putting newly awakened zeal into the call to the revival meeting which had just started.

The bell seemed the signal for prompt action on the part of the woman in the house, for the blazing pine was plunged into the ashes, and she came to

## Jane Dawson

the doorway. George thought, as she paused there a moment, then crossed the porch and approached him, that he had never before seen so much of decrepitude in her. Wrapped as she was in the folds of the darkness, yet he could almost see the quivering of her body. She took the vacant chair opposite him, leaned her sharp elbows on her knees, and pulled the poke-bonnet she wore day or night in doors or out over her eyes. Her thin, colorless dress clung to her slight form; he saw her bare toes through the holes worn in her shoes.

"Now, don't stop me," she began, in a voice that was dry and harsh and seemed to come as much from chest as throat. "There is no use blinding ourselves. You heard what Olin Dwight's mammy said at the cow-lot. Mean and low and spiteful and hypocritical as she is, she told the plain truth. She was right. All these years since you was a baby in that little trundle-bed in the house and a toddler about the yard, I hain't never mentioned your—your father's name to you. I was ashamed—more ashamed to have you or any living soul know who he was than all the rest of the trouble. If he had been a good man, a worthy man, like—like I once thought he was, I wouldn't care, but, oh, George! to have you know him as he is to-day crushes me into the very mire of shame. And yet you ought to know. Sarah Dwight is right. You ought to be told. I've put it off too long. It is due to you. You might—might meet him and humiliate yourself if you ain't forewarned. Last night, long after you stopped reading and went to bed, I had one of them fluttering spells of my heart,

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and I thought that I was about to die. I started to tell you then, but backed out when I looked in your room and saw you sleeping so calm and peaceful. I've prayed, as little as I believe such things are ever noticed—I've prayed for some way out of it. That one thing has always been uppermost in my mind. I have known of other folks having misfortunes like your'n and mine, and I never yet knew of the—the child growing up ignorant on that point. It is an awful thing, but truth even in that is better than not being told, and if I die without speaking my sin would be even greater. George—"

But he had sprung up and laid his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Stop!" he gulped, white and quivering. "You forget one thing, dear mother, or rather you don't realize that it would be better for me not to know—that I'd rather *not* know. Don't you see—can't you see that it would only open up the whole horrible thing to me? I'm satisfied as it is, but I wouldn't be then. It would make me mad. I might—might be tempted to— Oh, mother, don't say anything more about it!"

She pushed back her bonnet and gazed at him steadily. "Do you actually mean that, or are you just saying it out of—out of pity?"

"I mean it as God is my witness!" he cried. "I've never thought much about it. I know exactly how you feel, because I understand you. You have grown away from him, above him. To tell me about him would make me think about him, as—as a real person. While now he is dead to me. Why should

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I want to know his name? I'd rather blot it all out for ever and ever."

"Oh, Lord, Lord, if it *could* only be that way!" Jane's eyes seemed to expand in dumb eagerness. "It seems to me that I'd give all the rest of my life to get around it. You don't know—folks haven't dared, women nor men, to say nasty things to me before you sence you've been old enough to take up for me; but that's been the thing Sarah Dwight and the rest have stabbed me with when you wasn't on hand. They are all mad because they never knowed who—who he was, and they seem to think they will force me through you to give out his name."

"I've got some rights to be considered," George answered. "I have lived till now without being told, and I hope I never shall. Promise me here, right now, that you will drop the subject for good and all."

"I believe you mean it—I actually believe you really mean it!" Jane panted. "Thank God! that would make it so easy—so different."

"Then that's settled." He spoke with firm finality, and he bent over her, pushed back her bonnet, and kissed her wrinkled brow. "That's settled for all time. I have read somewhere that it is our duty to ignore everything that is disagreeable, everything that is ugly or sad. Let him and all memory of him go that way. To see him—to meet him and know that I was both of him and you, high as you are, and foul and cowardly as he is, would—"

"Yes, yes, you are right." Jane had covered her face and was shedding tears of relief. "But listen, George, there is one other thing that I must tell,

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and then it will all be done. I didn't think we'd ever talk plain like this—I told it in your ear as a baby, but when you got old enough to understand I—I got ashamed. George, George, listen, listen; I must say it if my heart dries up and burns to a crisp. I ain't like Cynthia Hill, the despised woman over in the Cove; I ain't like Mary Dillard, that was so much talked about when that young scamp left her high and dry. I pity both of 'em, but me and them are different, if I do say it. I was tricked, it seemed to me, by God Himself, and that's the point you've got to know if it kills me to get it out. I simply will not go to my grave without you understanding that. I wasn't more than sixteen. A big revival, like the one they are starting now, was going on. Everybody was excited. Like most of the other girls, I was all wrought up. They went, and got religion, and shouted and was plumb happy; but I couldn't feel as they did. I was worried over it. The neighbors and my mother and father prayed over me and read to me and argued. Then came the last night of the meeting. It looked like I was in the mind of all the rest. They called my name out in public, and prayed for me in a body. There was a young man—he lived close to us. He had spoken to me two or three times. He was—folks said he was handsome. All the girls liked him. Once—once he had walked a piece with me, and told me I was pretty, and that he liked me better than any other girl. He was a leader at meeting. He talked that last night of the revival. He talked in a way that none of the rest had, and—and, well, I *thought* I was converted. I shouted with the rest.

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A great light seemed to shine over me. I cried in joy. When the meeting was over the young man come to me and shook hands with me. We walked home together along that very road." Jane raised her hand and pointed toward the village. "Ma and pa went on ahead. They liked him, as everybody else did. We stopped at the spring. He told me he—loved me. He told me he was going to marry me right off. Oh, George—George, he was your—"

"I see—I understand," Dawson said, grimly. "I knew something like that was at the bottom of it."

"He come to see me the next day," Jane pursued, her voice issuing huskily through her hands, as she bowed her head toward her lap, "but he wasn't the same. There was a scared look on his face, and he kept watching the door while we sat talking as if he was afraid somebody would come in or hear what we was saying. He didn't speak of love or marrying, and went off with a bothered look. That night we heard that he had gone over the mountain on business. He never wrote me a line, and then the report come that there was a girl over there who he was engaged to."

George had resumed his seat. His face in the starlight was a yellow mask distorted in all its lines.

"It is well that you don't tell me," he said. "I might not be able to keep from—"

"Yes, yes, maybe; I've thought of that, too," Jane gulped. "I must finish. Then you'll know why I quit going to church—why I ain't like the general run. He got married over there that very week, and it was reported that he was not coming

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back here any more. I prayed then as woman never prayed before. I prayed that my cup might pass, that I might hide my awful secret from the people I loved. My prayers was not answered. I got so desperate I was like a wild thing. I wouldn't go to meeting, and some fools said I was bewitched. Then I threatened God, who I held responsible for my plight. I swore on my knees, with my hands clasped in agony, that if help didn't come I'd be an enemy to Him and His as long as the breath of life was in me. Two weeks before you was born ma and pa died within a month of each other, killed by shame. They had not held their heads up after my disgrace was out. They thought your father was another man. I let them die ignorant of the truth."

"I think you'd better stop now," George said, laying his hand caressingly on her head. "You are all wrought up and—"

"No, no, not till I am clean through and done with it," Jane shook her head, resolutely. "This hour has been long a-coming. The funeral services of ma and pa both times took place at the meeting-house. I went and set there on the front bench alone, out of respect I didn't know how to shirk, and both times heard myself alluded to as the chief cause of—well, I'll pass that over. It hurts like rusty spikes driven in my breast. I'll pass over your birth—only one old nigger woman, old Aunt Sally, that you took the meat and meal to the other day—was with me. She was with me that stormy night, and was too simple and ignorant to understand why I didn't want to look at you the first time."

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"You simply must not talk any longer," George said, firmly. "It will do neither of us any good to—"

"I say I have simply *got* to git it all out!" Jane beat upon her bony chest with her hand. "It lies here like a big, growing tumor that must be lanced. After you was born I worked in the field to make á living and pay my taxes, but I never had a happy minute. One night while you was about a year old and was sleeping in your cradle—a soap-box with the ends of logs for rockers, that I tacked together—I made up my mind to end it all. I went out to the well and got up on the curbing and put my feet over. I was ready. I remember I looked up at the stars and thought that in all their splendor and mystery they was heartless. I was about to drop down into the water when a certain thing stopped me. George, it was you a-crying for the milk that was in my breast. I went to you and picked you up. I reckon that was the birth of my love for you. The whole thing is a mystery as black as night, for out of the greatest agony that could come to a human being had come my sweetest joy, for that's what you've been ever since. My next step was finding out what a flimsy lot of religious stuff these folks believed in. That come by accident. A tin-peddler stopped one day, and I fed 'im on the porch. After he had eaten his dinner he took out a paper and begun to read it. It was the first copy I'd ever seen of *The Light of Reason*. He read some things to me and talked about them with the clearest understanding I'd ever run across. He promised to send the paper to me regular, and he did for a year or more. The paper called my attention to books



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by great and wise men, and when I could afford it I sent off for them. That's how you come to know as much about the truth as you do—that's why you know more in a minute than such puny sucklings as Olin Dwight do in a lifetime. He *may* git the money and go off to a theological school, and come back to flaunt his learning hereabouts, but he'll remain as blind as a bat in daytime. That's all, George. I'm through now, and I feel better for telling you."

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## CHAPTER IV



WHEN she had disappeared in the house he rose and went to the gate and leaned against it. The second bell for meeting was ringing, and down the road he saw the neighbors issuing from the houses and trudging toward the village. Olin Dwight and his mother and father came out of their cottage across the way and passed without seeing him. Olin had a Bible and a manuscript in his hand; Silas, his father, wore a linen coat, for the night was warm, and he carried his slouch hat by his side, and walked with a stoop and a shambling gait.

Presently from the farm-house next door on the right a man and a woman issued. They were Charles Chapman, a short man of much surplus flesh, middle-aged and bald, and his wife Amanda. As they passed him Chapman smiled and bowed.

"You'd better quit your foolishness, young man, and come to meetin'," he said, half jestingly, fanning himself with his hat. "We are goin' to turn things upside down. We are beatin' the woods for your sort."

"Not to-night," George returned, pleasantly. "I have something else to do."

The pair walked on, and their forms were grow-

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ing dim in the hazy distance when their daughter Myra tripped from the house, closed and locked the front door, and started in a brisk walk after her parents. When quite near to George she suddenly saw him, paused and looked at him hesitatingly from beneath the light silken scarf she wore over her abundant brown hair. She was about eighteen years of age, quite pretty, tastily dressed, and serious-looking.

"I've been thinking of you all the evening, George," she began. "I wonder if you'd do something if I asked you as a very, very great favor?"

"Try me," he said, forcing a smile. He opened the gate, and they stood close together. "I don't know that I ever refused anything you asked. You've always been so kind to me that—"

"This is different—very different," she checked him. "Listen, George. The girls have all promised to use their influence with the young men to induce them to attend this revival. I have been praying to-day—praying that you might see things in—in a better light. George, you are doing a great deal of harm. You talk well, you've read a lot, and some few are listening to your arguments. Won't you come to church to-night? May I not feel that I influenced you that far?"

"I can't, Myra—I simply can't!" He was thinking of his mother and her grim recital, of the enmity of the community to her, its stupid blindness to her depth, worth, and wrongs.

"But why, George?" the girl's sweet, appealing voice faltered, her sensitive face seemed to shrink under sheer disappointment. She laid a pretty

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hand on his arm impulsively, only to withdraw it quickly to apply her handkerchief to her drooping lips.

"Because I can't—not to-night, anyway," he said, haltingly. "You see, I've taken a stand in my way, as Olin and all the rest of you have in yours, and to go to meeting would look as if I went either to pick flaws or because I had altered my views."

"Oh, I don't want to hear about your views," Myra affirmed, with a little impatient rap of her foot on the ground. "I want you to realize the truth, the great undying truth, and be happy. You don't know it—you can't see yourself, but day by day your face and voice are growing harsher. Your eyes flash almost with dislike of all of us, and, young as you are, you show marks of worry. I have set my heart on your attending this meeting, and I simply can't have you refuse. I thought—I thought that maybe if you wouldn't go for any one else you might for me."

"I tell you you don't know; you can't begin to understand," George said, his voice quivering, his strong face softening under her anxious stare. "I have given up ever hoping to make you see it as I do. You must simply go your way and I mine. What I believe hinges on things I don't want to talk about—things I could not talk about—freely, at least."

"I think I know what you mean," the girl broke in, earnestly; "but you must not let all that influence you. You must not take up a fight like that. It will ruin you if you do. The odds are too great. You'd be fighting love with hate and re-

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sentment. Oh, George, come with me now. Why"—she was making a poor pretense at levity—"you cannot refuse the request of a lady to accompany her to church. Listen. You like Olin. He likes you, in spite of the fun you poke at his belief. I want you to go to-night for a special reason. It is a secret. I promised father I wouldn't tell a soul; but there is a big surprise for every one. It is something concerning Olin that is to happen at meeting to-night."

"Oh, I know, he is to speak," Dawson said, lightly. "He told me about it."

"That isn't it," Myra returned, quickly. "He knows nothing about it. It will make him awfully happy. Come with me and find out all about it. You will be glad you went, for his sake, if for nothing else. Hurry, George, I'm late!"

For a moment he seemed to hesitate under the sheer embarrassment of the situation. Just then a beam of light flashed across the gate. It was from a candle in the hand of Jane Dawson, and they heard her step as she trod the floor within.

"I can't go," he said, firmly. "Excuse me to-night, Myra."

"Very well." Her eyes were fixed on the moving light. "I'll run on, but, George, I'm going to pray for you at church to-night as no one ever prayed before. You are going to see the truth and throw off the load that is killing you."

He leaned heavily on the gate and watched her lone figure as it moved away in the starlight. Jane's candle was out, and the house behind him was a looming, forbidding object. He knew that she had

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gone to bed by the silence within. Lowering his head to the top of the gate, a shudder passed through him. Word by word his mother's story was whirling through his brain. He clenched his hands, bit his lips, and uttered a dry sob. The mellow singing of the worshippers swept over the field and was wafted back from the mountain-side:

"How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord!"

"Rubbish, bosh and rubbish!" he cried. "It was this—just this damnable fanaticism that ensnared the purest and best creature that ever breathed the breath of life. It robbed her of her youth, hope, and happiness, and made her a despised outcast among slow-witted fools who were unworthy of her notice.

"Fight?" he cried, raising his head and baring his brow to the starlight. "I'll fight it as long as there is a pulse-beat within my heart and brain. When she is dead and gone, I'll glory in the thought that I'm living as she lived—getting no more crumbs from the Master's table than have fallen to her, wanting no more."

Glancing at the house, and hardly knowing why he did so, he passed out at the gate, closed it softly, lest the clicking of the iron latch might reach his mother's ears, and walked down the road toward the church. He told himself that he would look at it from the outside, at any rate. He had done so before without attaching significance to one inevitable detail of the act—that of placing himself before a certain window through which he could see the pew in which Myra Chapman always sat with her parents.

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He reached his coign of vantage this evening without meeting any one. It was in the little graveyard on the right of the church. Around him stood grim, stony sentinels. Some were cracked and chipped, and bore ancient dates and designs and statements indicative of a faith which was not dead or even dying. The church was a narrow, whitewashed building, with green blinds. Beyond the crumbling fence of the enclosure horses and mules stood hitched to the boughs of trees and the wheels of various vehicles which had conveyed their owners many miles.

The house was packed from wall to wall. Sheltered from all eyes by the foliage of a young tree, Dawson stood and peered through his window at the sweltering, fanning human mass. In the yellow light of the glass lamps in mirrored brackets on the walls he descried the three Chapmans. Myra's head was slightly bowed as it rested on her hand, and a queer premonitory thrill went over him. Perhaps even at that moment, while his eyes were on her, she was praying for him.

He uttered a low, rasping laugh, and leaned to the right to see more of the interior of the building. The pulpit caught and held his gaze for a moment. The young minister, the Rev. Albert Love, a slender, beardless man, stood announcing the various features of the coming meeting. His face was wan and anæmic. He was nervous and low of chest; his arms were too long for his body. He was underpaid. His shirt was not well laundered; his collar was yellow and limp from the warmth of the night, and it and his white lawn necktie were out of shape.

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He had a kindly, shadowy eye, coughed behind his long hand, and sent a gentle, appealing voice out to attentive ears.

God had been most merciful to them all, Dawson heard him saying. The revival promised to be a blessed and far-reaching one. Preachers from neighboring towns had agreed to contribute their services from time to time. He was not going to preach this evening. He was not quite as well as usual, and, besides, a rare treat of a spiritual nature was to be theirs. A godly young man of the community, who felt called to the Lord's service as a minister, was to address them. Olin Dwight had almost from childhood shown a tendency toward work in God's vineyard. Instead of loving games and following the pursuits of average boyhood, he had given his spare moments to the reading of religious works, to talks with earnest Christian men and women about the one and only thing worthy of thought—the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ and the redemption through His blood of lost mankind. "Olin Dwight, my brothers and sisters, as he is to-day, is a direct answer to constant prayer. His mother told me that the one boon she had asked of God all through her son's childhood was that he might become a minister of the Gospel. She has been his constant companion; she has aided him to the full extent of her limited means. The boy is sure of his ultimate reward. As many of you know, he is working hard and saving money to the end that he may go away and get the education he needs to fit him for his particular work. It won't take but a year or so longer, I'm informed, and, when he goes



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and returns to you, I am sure you will agree with me that his course was a wise one. The other day I asked him if he thought he could stand up before you to-night and speak to you of his plans. It was a surprise to him, and, in natural doubt of his ability, as he said, to make a creditable address, he hesitated. He wouldn't give me a positive answer then, but he went home and talked it over with his good mother. She convinced him that it was the right thing to do, and so he consented. He is here to-night. He needs no introduction to you, who are his friends."

Shifting his position, Dawson now saw Olin Dwight on a bench with his mother in a corner of the room near the pulpit. He was pale, slightly bent forward, and held a manuscript in his right hand. Dawson saw Mrs. Dwight smile in a placid, confident way and put out her hand, and as she brushed back her son's long hair she was seen to whisper to him. Olin nodded, smiled mechanically, and rose, edging his way between the benches till he was out in the aisle, thence he advanced with a firm step toward the minister's outstretched hand. The next instant the two men stood side by side within the altar railing. The minister put his arm around the shoulders of his companion, waved his disengaged hand toward the expectant congregation, and sat down.

"The poor, deluded fool!" Dawson muttered to himself, and then he saw something that sent a chill over him, for his glance by sheer force of habit had sought the face of Myra Chapman, to find it fairly aglow and palpitating with hopeful, expectant ap-

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proval. A smile like the shimmering of a divine light played about the girl's wonderful eyes—the orbs over which George had marveled so often in his contacts with her. Tearing his gaze from a sight so maddening, he gave it to the rigid face of his friend.

"It is not all his mother's work," Dawson said, under his breath; "Myra had as much to do with it. He loves her. He couldn't help it, and—and in this thing to-night he has pleased her. He has pleased her, while I—well, what does it matter? I know what her folks think of me and mine. I reckon she thinks my soul is worth saving. She put herself out to give me a chance to come to-night, but I turned her down. I'd rather—I think I'd rather have her hate than be a fool for her sake."

George crept nearer the window, not unmindful for an instant that he must keep himself sheltered from all possible eyes. Almost a part of a young cedar-tree, the sharp twigs of which pricked his brow and cheeks, he leaned forward and listened. Closed though his senses were to the trite ideas advanced by his friend, there was one thing of which he was convinced now more than ever before, and that was that Olin Dwight was eloquent—that he was a born orator. The speeches the young man had made to the trees in the forests, to the boulders on the mountain-sides, had stood him in good stead. As his full, musical voice steadied itself and rolled out in impassioned waves, the effect of his simple words on his hearers was all but the work of magic.

"I am going to preach Christ and Him crucified because God, the Father, has called me," Dawson

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heard him saying. "In the dead hours of night, in the majestic stillness of the forest, out of the rumble and sweep of storm, in the flash and flare of lightning, God's voice has called me; on the dark dome of heaven His hand has written the command."

Through an odd mist which had fallen before him, Dawson again caught sight of Myra Chapman. Her eyes, strained on the face of the speaker, were filled with the blaze of triumph. She clasped and unclasped her shapely hands under stress of great emotion. She applied her handkerchief to her eyes; her breast under its thin covering rose and fell visibly; something between a smile and a line of tense feeling lay on her lips.

## CHAPTER V



GEORGE DAWSON stood through the remainder of the speech like a pillar of stone. Once only he spoke. "The thing which cursed my mother has also cursed me," he muttered. "She lost all that life held out—so have I. She lost by believing, I by refusing to believe."

As in a dream which had transported him to new and strange surroundings he saw Olin Dwight returning to his seat by the side of his elated mother. He saw Myra, her eyes full of tears, her face covered with smiles, bend over her father's knees to clasp the speaker's hand. The next moment another thing had riveted his glance. It was the gaunt face of Silas Dwight, Olin's father, who sat just behind his wife. Despite the things running rife through his brain, Dawson found himself studying that visage in wonder. It was the pale, drawn face and shifting eyes of inquiring despair—features moulded by utter hopelessness and marked by ever-present alarm. George was its sole observer to-night. The eyes of all others were on the son. A hymn was sung; there were shouts and exclamations of approbation all over the room. Silas Dwight had lowered his head, and of him George now saw only the shock of iron-gray hair. Other

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things were to happen. The hymn ended; Chapman, his fat hand on Myra's shoulder, had risen and stood swaying ponderously and smiling unctuously to those about him. He was a man of religious influence in the community, and the congregation was all attention.

"I've got some'n' to say," he began, taking a quid of tobacco from his mouth and dropping it to the floor, "and it seems to me that no time could be more fittin' than right now on the heels of the fine talk you all have heard. If me, and Brother Abe Lee and Brother Sam Strobe, who are a-settin' here in the bench behind me, feel extra pride in the glorious thing that has happened to-night, maybe you-all will pardon us when you've heard what I've been appointed to say.

"Ef you will all be patient I'll go back a piece and git my tale straight. One cold, bitter cold day in February, four year ago, me an' the two brethren I have mentioned was at Tom Mell's mill waitin' fer our turns to be ground. We'd been listenin' to Tom, who is an infidel, if he's anything, making some of his ungodly cracks at the true faith, and all three of us was givin' him the best we had in shop. I don't know—I reckon Mell 'lowed he was gettin' the best of the game, and maybe he was, for I've always said an infidel that *is* an infidel can argue infidelity a powerful sight better than a fellow can argue theology who ain't a trained theologian. Mell was a-laughin' purty free over his meal-trough, and sayin'—as he put it—that the stones of truth would grind me and the other two as fine as his rocks was grindin' the meal comin' warm out o' the spout,

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and no one of us seemed ready or knew exactly what proof to throw at him, when all at once somebody spoke up that we hadn't noticed up to that time. It was a boy not near out of his teens. He was settin' on a pile o' corn-sacks listenin'. Brethren and sisters, that boy was the young man that made the glorious speech you've just heard. He was always neat in his appearance, his hair was generally combed becomin' like, and his good mother saw that even his working-clothes was in order and mended and clean. Folks, I ain't goin' to sully the sanctimony of this house by repeatin' what Mell had said, but to the day of my death I'll never forget how that boy got up and stood lookin' at him. I'll never forget, neither, the words he said—the most scathin' reproach that ever fell from human lips. It was like, I imagine, the effect of the child Christ talkin' to the wise men in the manger. Olin's face was red, his eyes blazed fire, and he fairly panted as if he was facin' for the first time a human beast that was attackin' the sacredness of home. Mell hadn't nothin' to say; he was shut up like a jack-knife. He muttered something or other about a rule he'd made not to talk before boys, and tied up Olin's sack and helped him mount his hoss. All three of us, me and Lee and Strobe, followed the boy down the road a piece. I remember we all chipped in to buy him a Concordance of the Scriptures, which he said he didn't have. That was the first we heard of his high and lofty aim, and I can tell you that all three of us has watched him from that day forth. I say we watched 'im, an' I reckon we done more—we encouraged 'im with good advice

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an' gloried in his course, an' prayed—I know I have many an' many a time—that the Lord would help him to gain his aim.

“We saw 'im, year in, year out, workin' at this or that odd job, layin' by his little mite always with that saintly look in his face. His father—well, I may have some'n' to say about Silas Dwight later, an' I may not. It is all owin' to how I feel when the time comes. It is allowable, I reckon, to show up a brother's faults when they amount to criminal coldness to a great cause where warmth of spirit should abide. Silas Dwight had been prevailed on to set aside a patch o' ground which at odd times Olin cultivated, and last year most of us was in hopes the boy's crop would turn out enough to pay fer his first term at school, anyway, but an inscrutable Providence sent floods early that drowned out the young sprouts, and followed that up with a drouth and sun that burnt to a crisp what was left.”

Here Chapman paused. Abe Lee, a middle-aged man with tousled hair and bushy beard, had caught his hand and was drawing him downward to whisper in his ear. The speaker smiled and nodded and wiped his lips with his hand.

“Brother Abe says I'm stretchin' my knittin' too wide,” Chapman went on, good-naturedly; “he says him or Brother Strobe could have got through long ago. Well, he may be right, though I notice nobody hain't asleep. After that drouth, and Olin had set in to haulin' wood to town to help 'im out, an' his mammy was sellin' butter an' eggs when I reckon they needed 'em at home, me an' these two brethren made it our business to call on Brother—

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I started to say Brother, but I don't know as it is befittin' to call a man by such a title who has give up prayin' at home or in public, and who admits that he is a backslider, and only keeps his membership on sufferance, because nobody has took the trouble to inquire into the status of the case. We called Silas out to his fence and told 'im we thought if he ever expected any sort o' redemption or the benefit of divine grace in any measure at all, that he'd take the offer he was made by Brother Lee for the little piece of three-cornered woodland on the mountain, and spend the money on his son's religious education.

"Brethren, it hain't for me to pick at the loose threads of a man's soul, but when the whole warp an' woof of his religious character is full o' knots an' holes an' patches on top o' patches— If—if, I say, if Silas Dwight would look a body in the eye and say what he was one way or another—what it was that had ketched hold of him away back about the time Olin was born an' jerked him from a high place in religious usefulness—if he would do that we'd know where to put 'im an' what to do in his case; but he is just as dumb as a post, and looks down, and shifts and makes excuses and looks as nigh guilty o' some'n' or other as an innocent man could possibly look. He refused to sell the land, though he admitted it wasn't fetchin' in a penny an' was a dead expense in the way o' taxes. Then all three of us got mad. We told him if he didn't furnish the boy with the money we would do it out of our own pockets. We give 'im till yesterday to make up his mind. We did that and waited, but



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he didn't come to time. In fact, he was seen wanderin' about in the woods all by hisse'f, a habit he's had, it seems, for several years back. That settled it. We drawed up a paper betwixt us, all three agreein' to put up the money on Olin Dwight, as our bounden Christian duty. Olin knows nothin' about this; it is as big a surprise to him as the rest of you—even his mother has been kept in the dark till now. I don't believe in lettin' your right hand know what the left is about, but in a community like this you can't keep things from gettin' out, so I may state for the sake of accuracy, an' to avoid disputes in future, that I am a sort o' ring-leader in the movement. The truth is, I put in half of the full amount, and Lee an' Strobe divided the balance, half an' half, betwixt 'em."

With a satisfied smile Chapman lowered himself into his seat. George saw Myra as she leaned forward, her eyes joyously flashing; then Olin's astounded visage stood before him as it turned inquiringly on his mother. Between her head and his appeared the ashen mask of Silas. It was white and distorted, and, but for the more intimate emotions surging through his brain and heart, the lone spectator would have pitied the stricken man.

The meeting was over. An ambitious leader of singing attempted to "raise" a hymn. He rose in one of the amen corners and piped lustily, beating time with his hands, but he sang alone through the entire first verse and then stopped, for the house was in a tumult of excitement. The aisle was packed with a surging mass eager to shake hands with their favorite and his benefactors.

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"By gum, it's worth the money!" Abe Lee chuckled, as he wrung Chapman's fat hand and threw his disengaged arm about the bald-headed and almost stupefied Strobe.

George Dawson, now fearful of being seen by some one leaving the church, retreated into the deeper darkness of the graveyard, and thence made his way through the bushes to the road which led to his home. The way stretched out before him in the starlight, and along it he stumbled, his body heavy with a despair that seemed to be oozing from him like a material fluid. He was half-way home when he heard a sound behind him, and, fearing that he might be overtaken and seen by some one who was riding or driving, he stepped aside into the thicket which bordered the road.

It was some one afoot, and as the form got near he saw that it was that of a man—a man panting like some beast of the forest pursued unto death by eager huntsmen. It was Silas Dwight, and George saw him raise his hands toward the sky and heard him groan.

"O God, have mercy on me!" he muttered, quite audibly. His mumbling voice came back less and less distinctly as he plunged onward. Emerging from the bushes, George followed in his wake.

Reaching the gate of his home, the young man raised the latch stealthily and crept into the yard, telling himself that he would not awaken his mother. He tiptoed on the grass around to the rear and opened the unlocked door. He was traversing the narrow passage when Jane looked out of the door of her room.

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"Is that you?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I thought you were asleep."

"Well, I wasn't." She wore a white night-gown and appeared like a specter in the dark. "Wait; don't go to bed yet. I've got to know one thing, or I'll not close my eyes to-night. Did you go to—meetin'?"

"No; that is, I didn't go inside and take a seat."

"Oh, you say you didn't?" She advanced toward him as if trying to read his face in the darkness. He heard her draw a deep, trembling breath and exhale it like a sigh. "I may as well own it. I was at the window and saw Myra Chapman come by and heard her beg you to go to church. I couldn't help it. I crept up behind the side fence and caught all she said and the way she said it. I heard you refuse to go, but—but after she passed on, it seemed to me you changed your mind and tried to overtake her. The truth is, I couldn't see how a young man like you could stand out agin such a sociable invite from a girl as pretty and sweet and as friendly as Myra is to you. And she believes from the bottom of her heart that she was doin' you an everlastin' favor. You say you didn't go plumb in. What did you go there at all for?"

"I don't know, mother." His voice rang hollowly in the still passage. "I really don't know."

"I do, la, la! I do, my boy, if you don't. It moves a young person like soft wind does the swingin' limbs of a tree. You didn't go there like the rest of the unreasonin' gang. You went because—well,

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never mind about that. But I want to know one thing. She told you something was goin' to happen to—Olin Dwight to-night. I heard her say it. I knowed you wouldn't mind me listenin', since there ain't any secrets betwixt me and you, nor never can be; but did you find out what she meant?"

George hesitated a moment, then told her that money had been raised to send Olin to college. He was about to continue, but was checked by a sharp ejaculation on the part of Jane. She reached out and laid her hand on his shoulder, and he felt the quivering weight of it.

"You don't mean it—you *can't* mean it!" burst from her lips. "His mammy hain't got it, an' none of her kin has—if they had she wouldn't get it. None of 'em like 'er. They know 'er too well. As for Silas Dwight, he'd as soon— Huh! You are mistaken. You couldn't hear good."

Wondering over her mood, George explained more fully. When he had concluded, silence fell between them. Jane broke it finally.

"I see, I see," she said. "It's Chapman's work. La, la, how empty and despicable it all is! I'd rather be a snail and write my religion in slime on a dungeon wall than use God Almighty in my dirty work. Chapman hates Si—hates the boy's daddy—an' is willin' to pay to humiliate him. The other two are just his tools. I reckon Sarah Dwight will strut now in her robes of sanctimony. She will be the mammy of a preacher at last. Away back she tried to marry one that left her high and dry because she was too anxious. She hain't got no respect for the man she took, an' Olin is her only


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ambition. Huh! an' it looks like she's goin' to win. Well, well, don't you let it bother you. He may study and study and study till he can answer every question his teachers put to him, and when he comes home you can lay 'im out stark and stiff with a word, just as you always have done. If he had yore brains he'd read what you read, an' study what you study. He wouldn't be satisfied with the baby food he is suckin' from a bottle now."

Retreating into her room, Jane heard her son going to his. She sat down on the edge of her bed, and with her thin hands on her bony knees she listened to George as he undressed. Presently all was quiet, and she reclined on her pillow and lay staring at the ceiling, which, in the darkness, seemed the starless firmament of the heavens.

"She is gloatin' over me now," Jane whispered. "She'll want me to hear it as soon as possible. She thinks it 'll kill me. She's in high feather to-night."

## CHAPTER VI

 LIN DWIGHT and his mother left the church and started homeward. Silas had disappeared, and neither of the two had missed him, so completely were they absorbed by the surprising revelations of the evening. Mrs. Dwight clung affectionately to the arm of her son, lowering her head till it almost touched his shoulder.

"Did you know it was coming? Did you have the faintest idea of it?" he asked, in the tone of a happy child.

"How could I?" she answered, bubbling over in her turn. "Some time ago I hoped Brother Chapman might help you, but I gave up the idea when I heard him railing out at your father about not going more to meeting. He never has liked your father, but that doesn't matter. This will be the making of you, my boy."

"I wish he hadn't been so hard on father," Olin said. "Harsh words like those in public are not likely to turn a man from set habits. I was glad to hear the good news, but I wish it had come in a more kindly way."

"It won't do your father a bit of harm," Mrs. Dwight returned, coldly. "He needs a raking over the coals. He knows that it is the dearest wish of

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my life to see you succeed in the ministry. He knows it is all you care for, too, and yet he has been getting colder and colder toward religious things, and acting as stubborn as a mule in general. It makes people talk, and puts a stumbling-block in your way, for folks like to think that a preacher belongs to a religious family. It really looks like he's not pleased by what happened to-night. I suppose he has gone home sulking over Brother Chapman's remarks."

"It all seems too good to be true," the young man said, with a low, joyous chuckle. He took his hat from his brow and swung it by his side, and walked so rapidly that the little woman had to quicken her step to keep pace with him.

"I thought something was going to happen, from Myra's face as they came in," he said, suddenly. "I didn't know what it was, but she looked excited and pleased, and kept watching me with a queer, knowing smile on her face. Of course, her father had told her, but I thought it was something else she and I had been talking about."

"Something else?" Mrs. Dwight shook his arm playfully. "Look here, Olin, you and Myra are both too young to be thinking just now of—"

But for the darkness she would have seen the deep flush that had overspread his sensitive face.

"Oh, mother, don't, don't!" he cried. "You are constantly accusing me—I mean you are constantly speaking of—of me and her in that tone. I have never thought of—I have never dared to think of her in that way. She has never given me the slightest reason to think she could care for me

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in any other way than as a friend she wants to help."

"Then what did you mean just now?" Mrs. Dwight spoke in a most casual tone, and yet there was a certain insistent demand in her renewed grasp of his arm, the steady upward glance into his face. "What had you and she been — talking about?"

"Why, you see," Olin made answer, "Myra and I are worried about George Dawson. We both like him. He is as true as steel. He will do anything on earth for a friend. We've seen him tried in hundreds of ways. He is brave; he's unselfish; he is, if we read him right, suffering horribly in spirit. He has a great intellect, there is no getting round that; he has a powerful mind. He is a man that would do great good in the world if he could just be made to see the truth. You see, Myra and I thought that maybe he would come out to hear me speak to-night. She promised to go by his house and ask him. I saw her mother and father come in without her, and I knew she was keeping her promise. Then she came in alone, and I thought from her face that he had agreed to come. But, of course, as he wasn't there, it must have been the other thing that made her look so pleased. She knew it would make me happy. George will come out all right. He has been listening to Tom Mell, but—"

"He has been listening to his mother!" Mrs. Dwight fairly jerked the words out. "She has given him books and papers to read. She started Mell on his blasphemous track. It was she that bought the first unorthodox books and papers that



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ever got circulated here. You and Myra had as well let George Dawson alone. You will only besmirch yourselves and lower your standards by associating with him. Nothing will alter him. He is like a twig bent when it is tender and left to grow crooked. His mother is at outs with all decent folks and delights in dragging their religion in the mire. It is the only way she can hit back, and she does it every chance she gets."

"I'm sorry for her," Olin Dwight remarked, thoughtfully. "I believe if Our Saviour were here to-day that she would be the first person He'd go to see. You remember the rebuke He administered to the mob that was stoning—?"

"You needn't stand up for her," Mrs. Dwight interrupted, with an impatient sniff. "Sinning and repenting and showing repentance is one thing, but sinning and sticking to it and trying to tear down the mainstay and prop of a religious community is criminal. Don't talk to me about that woman—don't do it, I tell you! She is nothing to you or me. Let her go her way. She is training her son, and with the help of God I'll train mine. She's called the imps of darkness to help her, while I look to the source of all good in the universe. My guide-book is the Word of God, while she doesn't do a thing or think a thing that is not born in hate and malice. I spoke kindly to her to-day—putting myself out to tell her about your talk to-night, and she rewarded me by almost ordering me away from her fence."

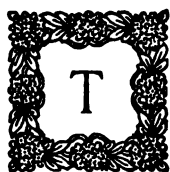
"I'm sorry on George's account that it happened," Olin said, in a tone of deep regret. "I

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reckon he will sniff in disgust when he hears of this to-night. He's a queer chap. When I get back from school I am going to do my best to bring him to our way of thinking. A fellow like that is worth winning to a cause."

They were now near their home. A form unrecognizable in the faint starlight leaned on the gate from the inside. It was Silas Dwight, and, seeing them coming, he turned and walked into the unlighted house. When they had reached the steps of the veranda they heard him moving about in his room. He stumbled over a chair, and they knew that he was undressing in the dark.

## CHAPTER VII



THE following day was a hot one. The morning sun was fiercely beating down on George Dawson as he plowed in the field. His horse was steaming like a drying blanket. Under the bands of the harness a cream-colored lather had formed from the mixture of sweat and dust. No cloud could be seen in the blue expanse overhead. He had reached the end of his furrow on the hillside, and was turning his horse to go back, when he heard a sound in the pine coppice behind him. It was land belonging to Silas Dwight, and it was Silas himself whose footstep he had heard. He had a woodsman's axe on his shoulder, and, with an expression on his face that somehow recalled the man's look at church, and with a queer shifting glance that showed a tendency to rest on the ground, he advanced slowly and yet with an evident desire to detain the plowman.

"I've been up there chopping white-oak logs," he said, in lagging, awkward tones. "You bet that is a job for a hot day. They was cut last fall, and I thought I'd split 'em up for fire-wood before they are too tough to handle."

George nodded wonderingly, his observant eyes taking in the tense play of the man's facial lines. Among all the men of his acquaintance he had found

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none who had at once mystified and interested him as had Dwight. Lowering his axe to the ground, Silas grasped his beard in his hand and pulled down on it till his lips parted and his yellow teeth showed in jagged rows. He jerked his bushy head toward the village, and said:

"I didn't see you at meeting last night. I looked over the church, but didn't see you. I reckon if you got up as early as you generally do and come to work you haven't heard the news—the whopping big news that by this time, no doubt, is galloping over the country like stampeded cattle. Three skinflints are going to spend some money on my—on Olin. I thought I'd just stop—knowing the report would get to you—and explain that I had nothing at all to do with it, being, you see, as there is no telling what shape the report may get to you in."

"I was outside," George confessed, with rising color. "I happened to be passing the church and stopped to look in. I heard most of it."

"Oh, you say you did!" Silas's eyes emitted the faintest hint of a flash as they stared eagerly. "Then you got the straight of it. I reckon you could tell, too, by the way it all come up, that I wasn't in any shape or form mixed up in it. You know in reason that if I had had a hand in it Chapman wouldn't a-held me up to shame like he did. In fact, you may have heard him state that all along I have refused to contribute to the boy's schooling on that line. Well, that's so, George, that's so, and I wanted you—somehow I wanted you to know it."

"Me? Why, it's nothing to me," George said, puzzled by the man's words and evident agitation.

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"I know—I know," Silas added, quickly, and his perturbed glance busied itself with a clod of earth which he was pulverizing by raising and dropping his axe upon it. "Of course it isn't. It would be silly to claim it, but, you see, I've watched you and Olin grow up side by side, so to speak—you in one yard, and him in another—with only a month or so between you in ages. As a little toddling chap in your red dress you may remember you used to come to my orchard fence, and I'd poke red apples through the cracks to you. Well, I watched the—the hard time your mother had in making ends meet, and I reckon whatever speck of religion I ever had was of a sort that told me—as I've heard you say in your talks with Olin—that told me, I say, that a man ought to love his neighbor as much as he does himself. That being the way I've always felt, you know, made me not want to see my own—made me not want to see a son of mine outstripping you in point of education, clothes, social chances, or—or anything else."

"That is very kind of you," George said. "I have always thought you were a good man—that you had far more real religion than—"

"No, no, don't say that." Silas's tone was that of almost abject appeal. "Don't talk that way, George. As God is my final Judge, I ain't trying to blow my own horn, or make you think well of me. There was just that one point that I wanted you to understand—you, anyway. You see, Olin's mother is dead set on having him rise high in the community and be a big, shining light. She thinks it is the good of lost humanity that she is after, but

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it ain't—it ain't that any more than it's Chapman's aim. He has two things in view: getting all these folks to think he's a big benefactor, and striking an underhanded lick at me. But that's a side issue. What I don't like to see is Olin falling into an easy profession like that, while you have to stay on at the sort o' drudgery you are now at. I say I—"

In drawing his plow backward to thrust its point into the soil the singletree became detached, and the horse, slightly frightened by the jangling trace-chains at his heels, started to run away. He had gone only a short distance when George overtook him, caught the trailing plow-line, drew him sharply around, and hitched him to the plow.

"I reckon you think I'm a strange sort o' fellow," Silas said, a look of startled craftiness in his eyes.

"Oh, I don't know," George answered, with a slight shrug. "Every individual is different, and all are interesting."

"I am not a man to forget favors," Silas said, clearing the huskiness out of his throat. "You may not remember it, George, but you did a thing once that—well, I never forgot it. I remember it all the more because Olin was there and took no part. It was at Mell's mill. You remember Mell had shut off the water to fix a cog in a wheel, and we was all there in a bunch—you and me and Olin and Chapman and his two cat's-paws. It seemed like Chapman had been waiting for a chance to insult me before folks, and he took it that day. He told me that I was a disgrace to the community for the way I'd backslid and acted in one way and another in regard to

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church matters. I am not a coward — nobody accused me of that during the war, but I can't spill blood over religion, so I was just setting there taking all he said like a convict under a judge's sentence, when, George, you jumped in. You was mad. Your eyes was blazing, your voice rolled like thunder; you was pale as death; you shook your fist in his face and called him a sneaking, hypocritical coward that never had been known to insult anybody, except in a way like that. It shut 'im up. He tried to pacify you, but you turned your back on him and walked off. Lord, Lord, talk about heaping coals of fire — talk about *anything*! I could have fallen at your feet — I could — well! Me and Olin got in our wagon and rode home. He couldn't talk of anything but how horrible it was for me to have had a row with a man who had encouraged him in his hopes like Chapman had, and who was such a big religious leader, to say nothing, I reckon, of the gal in the question. I listened to him, but I could have kicked him out of the wagon. You — you was the real thing. You sympathized. You seemed to see my plight and acted as quick and sure as a gunshot. Now, I reckon you see why I don't jump up and crack my heels together and shout over what happened last night. You are right in what you've always said that the agents of the humble and lowly Jesus have no right to wear fine clothes and live on beds of ease while preaching His word. You are right, and I'll take no hand in what Olin and his mother are bent on. They are blind as new-born kittens. I don't want that sort of religion — a religion that hogs like Chapman fatten

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on and waddle about under, bragging of their good deeds as he did last night, and looking like he was ready to fly off to glory. George"—Silas leaned on his axe-handle till his face was nearer the young man's—"I want to help you. They are helping him—the whole howling bunch of them, and I want to help you. A taunt was thrown out last night about me having that useless tract of land that I wouldn't take a good offer for. Huh! I wouldn't sell it for that gang to gobble up and shout over, but this is different. Of course, it would have to be just between you and me, private like—but I'll sell it if you will take the money and go off to school and—"

It was the almost incredulous stare in George Dawson's eyes that checked the speaker's flow of words. A flush of amazed gratitude overspread the fine features of the younger face. He put out his hand and laid it on the gaunt shoulder of Silas.

"I couldn't let you do that," he said, with emotion. "I couldn't think of it. You are exaggerating what I did that day at the mill. It was nothing. I got mad; that was all. Besides, Olin was pardonable in a way. He was standing up for his interests. You forget"—George's voice became unsteady—"that Chapman is Myra's father."

"I know—I know," Silas thrust in quickly, the lids of his eyes drawing closer together under a baffled stare, "and I know something else. Wish to God I didn't, but I know it as well as I know that 'Old Bald' up there is the highest peak in the range."

"You say you know—" George began, but his



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voice faltered and died in his throat. He bent down and detached his plow-line from the hoofs of his horse, and when he had finished he avoided the gaze that was still fixed on his face.

"Yes, I know, and it is the worst thing of all for me to stand by and see," Silas declared. "I know—you see, I've watched you time after time when you didn't suspect it. I've been close to you when Myra came along, and I've seen the look in your eye, the color in your face that can't be misunderstood, and it's been like a lash on my bare back; for, George, the day is coming when that sweet, pretty girl will have to make a choice. She will have to choose between two men who represent questions as wide apart as the sun and moon. So far, it looks like Olin has the advantage, for he stands for what she stands for, and he's going to fit himself all the better to fight on her side. With his schooling and diploma he'll come back more worshipped by these galoots than ever, while you'll be—George, I want to furnish that money. *I want you to have your chance*, if God Almighty ever intends to—to let you have one."

George was deeply moved. He stood silent for a moment, his eyes on the quivering features before him. Then he said:

"It is very good of you. I hardly know what to say to show you how much I appreciate it, but I can't take help from any living man."

"You say you can't?" There was a sigh of despair in the old man's voice. "Maybe you'd better not make up your mind now—there is no great hurry. Olin ain't going till next week, and—and—"

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"I couldn't take it at all," George answered, firmly. "I would be miserable using another man's money. You see, it's like this: I reckon I've grown up with a certain feeling that I am obliged to stand alone in the world, and it has made me, in a way, independent of others. Sometimes I feel rather blue over not having a proper education. A college, from what I've read of them, seems like a thing 'not made with hands,' a palace where all men have an equal chance, and brains and ideas are the standards."

"Yes, yes; and you are the one for it," Silas still allowed himself to urge. "I've known that for a long time. You read and pick and choose for yourself, and stick this and that fact together, and astonish folks with your statements, so they can only stare like slobbering-mouthed idiots and hurry to cover under this or that puny excuse. I've set and listened to the talks you fellows have had at the store and the mill, and wondered—yes, just actually wondered. Your face would be calm and steady and your eye as true as a beam of sunshine. You'd be like that while they would be excited, or mad and ranting, and charging you with blasphemy. I remember once that they actually pounced on you and told you that you ought to be tarred and feathered and rid out of the settlement on a rail, and simply because you told them what you honestly believed. Yes, George, I want you educated. I've heard smart men say you want to be a lawyer, and that you'd make a good one. I want to see you climb as high as your great brain will take you. A college education would do it—this work here in the broiling sun is not for your sort—it's

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a nigger's job. There will be something out of joint in the universe if—if Olin rises and you stay down, and you will stay down, my boy, if something ain't done. He's got a smooth tongue, and the stuff he's learning is what the majority wants. His plan of salvation is as simple and easy as falling off a log. As Mell says, their favorite song is, 'Jesus paid it all, all the debt I owe.' Yes, George, you've taught me a lot. I've never seen the backs of any of the books you talk about, but I'll bet they wasn't written by fools. There is one thing I've always wanted to ask you point-blank. It seems to me"—here the speaker's voice faltered slightly, and he looked aimlessly across the fields—"it seems to me that I've heard you say you didn't believe God would inflict a hell of actual burning fire and brimstone on the creatures He has made."

"No, I don't believe it," George answered, simply. "It isn't reasonable; the idea is too manlike—too primitive and vindictive."

"Ah, I see, God's too merciful, isn't He?" There was a lilt of relief in the tone and a faint tinge suffused the earnest face of the old man.

"Yes, and yet we know," George went on. "We can prove scientifically and to the satisfaction of any mind that sin *is* punished, terribly punished."

"Oh, you think that, too!" The face of the old man fell. "Folks believe that, do they—I mean other folks besides the preachers and church members?"

"Yes, every observant man knows that to be a fact to a greater or smaller degree. You don't have far to look for proofs of it. There is Jason Bed-

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ford, here at Shelby, who killed a friend of his in a row more than twenty years ago. It is common report that he has never had a moment's rest since then. They say he sees the dead man night and day."

"Do you reckon?" Silas's head swayed like that of an automaton on a pivot. His eyes widened till the lids lay tight over the glaring balls. "Don't you reckon his trouble comes from him being unable to rectify the wrong he done? and won't it go on after—even after his body is in the ground?"

"Yes, that seems reasonable, of course." The breeze had risen slightly, and George took off his hat and allowed it to play over his damp brow. The wheat in his near-by field was rippled in shades of dark and light green like the surface of a lake. He was filled with poetic reverence for the scene. He inhaled the fresh air with a throbbing sense of exaltation he could not have analyzed. The fathomless depths of azure stretching above and beyond the beetling tops of the mountains seemed to be full of spiritual explanation and promise of intellectual reward to him who would search comprehendingly. The voice beside him reminded him of the existence of his companion.

"Bedford's case is bad, bad enough like it is," Silas murmured, still with the dead glare of inquiry in his hope-searching orbs; "but maybe others have had worse. Suppose—we'll just say for an instance—that a man had consigned somebody, some innocent, unsuspecting person, we'll say, to prison, to exile from home and friends, to a lonely, ill-fed life in a dungeon, to the wearing of the stripe of crime

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though innocent, and suppose it didn't end there? Suppose the effect, like a plague amongst folks hemmed in betwixt walls, kept spreading, and unborn children had to come to life and suffer, and there wasn't no way—*no way* under high heaven for him to stop it? Suppose he prayed on his knees till they rotted off and no help come? Suppose—suppose he was willing to declare his guilt a million times to the whole world, and let the just and the righteous and the clean all pass by in a row and spit in his face—suppose he was willing to do that and more, but even *that* would only make things worse? George, George, my boy, wouldn't that convince him or anybody that there was such a thing as unpardonable sin? But wait—wait! That ain't all—that ain't nigh all. What if he had—I hardly know how to say it—what if he had used God Almighty Himself to bring about his crime? What if he had cloaked himself in the holiest garb of sanctimony, and in that way enticed his victim on to—to death?"

With his rapt gaze on the mountains George had only half heard what seemed to him to be the rambling talk of a garrulous old man.

"Even *then* there would be a way out," he answered. "It might be long in coming, but it would eventually come; if not in this life, in another, for the law of God is not a law of retaliation. Men suffer for their own good and the good of others."

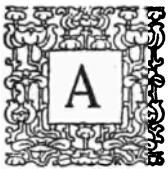
A few moments later they parted. Silas trudged homeward, his axe on his bowed shoulder. The sun's rays were like fire on his head and back. He walked

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with heavy, turgid movement. At the edge of the field, hidden by the young trees of a coppice, he paused and looked back at the lone toiler.

"God have mercy!" Silas groaned, and turned and walked on.

## CHAPTER VIII

 YEAR rolled round. It was spring again. The afternoon was cloudy and close. Charles Chapman was at home. To get more air than was possible in the house, he had seated himself, without coat or hat, on his front veranda. Myra had gone for his pipe, which she had filled with tobacco. With it she brought a shovel from the kitchen holding some live coals of fire. With his stubby, slippered feet on the balustrade, and his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows, exposing his fat, hairy wrists, Chapman took the pipe, and with the tip of his finger shoved a red coal into the bowl, smiling and puffing.

"That's a good girl," he said. "Throw the fire down and wait a minute. What did 'our parson' write the last time? I saw his letter on the table in the sitting-room. I'd have opened it if I'd dared. His handwriting has improved; it's as neat as a bookkeeper's. Say, what did Olin write?"

"I'm not going to tell you a thing," Myra answered, flushing in vexation. "You are always teasing, and I don't like it. It seems strange, but old people never joke about anything but marrying. It is sickening to hear so much about it."

"Well, I won't no more." Chapman sucked his pipe-stem audibly, and blinked under his bushy

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brows. "They say that many a good match has been broke all to flinders by parents being too anxious and pushing things too fast. Young women like to run their own heart business. One reason I ask about Olin so much is so I can report to them two fool partners of mine who invested in him when I did. They act like they were in their dotage, and get red with pride whenever his bare name comes up. I'll tell you, if Olin can come up to their expectations when he lands back here he'll have to know as much as two bishops. They act like they had bought him at public outcry on the block, when, as you know, both of them together only put in as much as I did, and I don't go around stopping everybody that passes to talk about the deal. Why, I heard Lee say last night after prayer-meeting—and Strobe nodded his head like he agreed—that a body who put money into a man of that sort would get credit on the Day of Judgment for every soul the fellow saved. Just think of the Almighty keeping accounts, in fractions like that! Well, of course, I want Olin to do well. I never like to have it said of me that I am no judge of men, young or old. You said he was taking prizes and standing at the top of his class, didn't you?"

"I see I'll have to tell you." Myra was knocking the ashes from the shovel on the edge of the veranda floor, and she now sat gracefully on the balustrade. "I was trying to keep the news, because you three make such a fuss over everything. Olin is going to get through much earlier than anybody expected. He will be back early next month."

"You don't say—well, well!" Chapman drew his



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feet down to the floor and edged his ponderous body around till he faced his daughter. "That is news for Lee and Strobe, sure. It will tickle them clean to their toes. We'll have a whopping big time when Olin gets home. They've got a little spindling-legged chap over at Mossville that has drawn off some of our floating element, but competent judges say he don't know the a b c's of doctrine, and is slow and jerky in his delivery, and looks and acts as stupid as a calf in or out of the pulpit. We've got Olin salted down for our church; the presiding elder is no fool. He knows about the cash I put in, and that it is my wish to keep the boy here. I tell you, Myra, Olin's needed, and that bad. We've got more infidelity sprouting and taking root in this valley than any part of the State. Tom Mell and Jane Dawson started the devilment, and the woman's poor, unfortunate son has taken it up. I've heard his outlandish talk, and it is getting worse and worse. The trouble is that some folks listen, and go to him for opinions; but we'll end all that. When our young war-horse gets here we'll oust the scamp and his meddlesome mammy. We'll make it so hot for them that they will be glad to sell out and decamp."

The fine face of the girl had darkened, and her dreamy eyes flashed reproachfully as they rested on the rubicund countenance of her father.

"You will gain nothing that's right in that spirit," she said. "Kindness and gentleness, and even sympathy, are the only things that will do any good where persons disagree in religious matters. As for me, I've always been sorry for George and

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his mother. I know they don't see things as we do, but they have big, tender hearts in them. They feel that they have been wronged, and they are bitter against life in general. Christianity ought to give such people comfort, because Christ Himself would have done it. He would have done it with a word, with a whisper, with a look of the eye. He would have understood them."

"Don't talk silly to me," Chapman commanded, impatiently. "I know folks of that sort clean through. The only way to settle daredevils like them is to stamp their foolishness out of them—show them what decent folks think of them. Jane Dawson put herself outside the pale of respectability, and, because she couldn't get folks to indorse her shameful conduct, she is making war against everything and everybody about her. She isn't content with her own efforts, either, but has raised up a man to take her place when she's dead and gone, a man, by glory! that is getting to be a power amongst us."

"He has done a lot of good things," Myra said, gently. "I've heard you say so yourself. You said only last night that he was very much disturbed the other day because a man was mistreating a horse on the street, and went and persuaded the man that the animal was sick. You said he did it while nobody else gave the matter a thought."

"I know; that's the trouble," Chapman growled. "He's a powerful bad influence under a seeming garb of good. His mammy's different, and so is Tom Mell. Nobody cares what either of them believe or say. She's acting in hate, and Mell is just

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trying to show off and let folks know he's got plenty of money and traveled about some. But they listen to George. He isn't always ready with his gab—looks like it sorter has to be drawn out of him. I've seen Lee and Strobe nag him down at the store with all sorts of statements for a good hour before a thing would happen, and then he'd flare up and let fly at them with the most outrageous assertions that I ever heard come from a human tongue. If Christian folks would pounce on him at such times, or turn off in plumb disgust, the outlook wouldn't be so bad, but they listen with their mouths wide open, and some of them go so far as to nod and chuckle and look at Lee and Strobe, as if they thought they was down and out. There is nobody here now that can shut the fool up; but there will be, thank the Lord! Olin Dwight will land here fresh from a college that was founded and built for the purpose of settling the hash of such chaps as that. Olin was a good one before he went off to study, and I'll bet he's a corker now."

"George and his mother are both to be pitied." The iron shovel rang as Myra idly tapped it against the toe of her shoe. "They lead such lonely lives. Only last week as I was passing the gate of her house she was taken with one of her fainting spells. George was at work in the garden and ran in to her. I waited at the gate, and he came out very pale and excited. He was going for a doctor, and thought she was dying. I told him I'd go in and stay with her, but he stopped me. 'You mustn't,' he said. 'I've given her my word. She made me promise that if she was ever taken suddenly that

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I would not let the neighbors go to her.' George thought I didn't understand, but I do. She doesn't get sympathy now, and she doesn't want it when she is helpless. Father, that's pitiful—pitiful! It made my heart ache."

"What did the doctor say was the matter?" Chapman inquired, indifferently.

"He didn't get there till late, and I didn't hear," the girl made reply. "It couldn't have been very bad, for George had hardly left before she came to the door to call him back. She saw me and bowed, and I went in to her."

"You did? You say you did? Good Lord!"

"Yes, I felt it to be my duty. She treated me coldly at first, but I kept trying to help her, and she seemed to appreciate it. I persuaded her to lie down, and fixed her pillows and made a cup of tea, which she drank and said was the best tea she had tasted since she was a girl. She caught hold of my hand and pressed it, and then she said—she said"—Myra's glance was averted from her father's somnolent face—"that she didn't believe I actually hated her like many others did. She said she could feel it in the way I acted and talked. She was still for some time, with the sheet pulled up against her face; then she looked at me suddenly, and I saw that her cheeks were wet with tears; her lips quivered like a child's. She almost sobbed when she said: 'They can all hate me and heap abuse on me as much as they like and it won't make a bit of difference; but I wouldn't want an innocent young girl like you to think that there is a woman on earth as vile as they make me out.'"

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Myra's clear, young voice broke; there was a telltale glitter in her eyes.

"Huh, I say!" issued from her father's stoical lips. "I reckon she *would* like to convince somebody of something. The next step would be her evil teachings. She'd pump them into you as she has into her boy and every other person she's got close to."

"You are certainly mistaken," Myra insisted. "Not one word was said about religion between us, and she even told me that I'd better not stay longer. She got up for that reason, I am sure, and declared she felt all right. I had to leave—there was nothing else to do. Outside I met George and the doctor, and later I heard she was better."

"And so you went there and did not even tell me about it." The voice came from the doorway behind them. It belonged to Myra's mother, a woman past middle age, with blue eyes, regular features, and dark hair smoothed close down over her forehead in puritanical fashion. "I've been expecting to hear you own up to something of the kind. You are always throwing out hints about how sorry you are for her. Well, I am, too. I suppose everybody is, for that matter, but what can we do about it? The Saviour *did* go to see such folks—of course He did. That was what He was on earth for, and He made them believe and change their ways. But no one else can do anything with a character like Jane Dawson. She glares at you like a wild animal every time you pass close to her. She was trying to drive her young calves in at a gap in her fence one day as I was coming along, and they broke into

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a run. They were coming toward me, and I headed them off, and between us we made them go in. But she didn't even thank me—if she said a word, I didn't catch it. It looked like she was as mad as fury because it happened."

Myra made no direct answer. Her mother had advanced and stood quite close to her. A noisy flock of chickens, turkeys, and ducks had gathered at the steps eager to be fed. "I've got to silence the things," Myra said, as if glad of an opportunity to change the subject. She went down the steps and around the house to the barn in the rear, followed by her winged friends.

"She always runs away the minute I say a word about Jane Dawson," Mrs. Chapman remarked to her husband. "She knows what I am afraid of—she knows well enough. She knows you are too blind and absorbed in your own matters to care what she does, but she thinks different about me."

"Well, what are you afraid of?" Chapman asked, carelessly, and in the tone of contempt he always had for the opinions of his little spouse.

"Well, if you will have it, I'm afraid of what I'd be afraid of if I was young and unmarried like she is, and had her soft heart. I'm afraid she's just a little bit too friendly with George Dawson, and, moreover, I'm afraid it isn't the best indication in the world for her to be taking up for his mother as she always does."

"I'm afraid of nothing of the sort." Chapman allowed the curves of a smile to sink into his fat face. "I'm not afraid, because she is just about the most Simon-pure Christian that ever walked the earth,

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Sunday, Monday, or any other day. She'd no more marry a self-confessed heretic like George Dawson than she'd look with favor on a black nigger. Besides, I know what's going on in another quarter. You can't tell me that letters will pass and repass, as I've seen them do, without something behind it. You may not know it, but she's cut out for a preacher's wife, and the wife of a bright one, too."

"Well, I've thought that myself," the little woman admitted, "and I'm glad Olin's coming home. He will look to his interests, I reckon. You can say you are not afraid of the other one because he believes like he does, but that is because you are a man and not a woman. Religion nor nothing else will keep a woman from falling in love with a fellow as sad and depressed and with such big, dreamy eyes and good looks as George Dawson has got. Just after the war, when we was all so mad at the North, folks used to say that no true Southern girl would ever marry a Yankee; but they did in solid droves—looked like the very hated uniform drew them on. Sally Wilson, over in Habbersham, took one she nursed when he was shot—she took him although his side had killed her father and the only brother she had. You see—you see," the speaker went on, observantly, as she leaned against the balustrade and laid her hand on her husband's knee for emphasis—"you see, Myra may go on hoping that she will get George to alter his belief. That, no doubt, is her idea now; but she may get into deep water before she knows it. I don't think she'd ever marry a man of that sort—I don't mean that she'd hold his birth over him. She wouldn't care

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a hill of beans about that, but she wouldn't marry a man who held out against her religion. She's young, Charles, but she's the best, truest Christian that I ever knew."

"Well, I tell you we needn't bother." Chapman lowered his feet to the floor, and rose stiffly. "She's going to make one of the purtiest matches of any girl in the county. I'm no fool, and I'm watching it. I've got long, keen foresight. She's not only going to be married, but she's going to marry the right sort of a chap—one all of us will be proud of. Huh! he'll think I'm all right, I reckon, after I've furnished him with his profession and a wife that is already the apple of his eye."



## CHAPTER IX



OLIN DWIGHT had returned. In the dearth of news from which all such localities suffer, the report sped along the mountain roads and paths with almost the swiftness of a telegraphed message. It was as eagerly received in the fields among the bowed toilers and at the doors of the farm-houses by the women and girls as if it pertained to their own personal good fortune. After all, it was a thing over which local pride had a right to preen its feathers. The boy who, from the very cradle, had been prayerfully consecrated to the ministry, had eclipsed all his fellows. Faith and self-sacrifice had won. The names of Charles Chapman and his lieutenants were on every lip. What a glorious reward these men were to receive for their insight, and the courage to act on it! And the benefit was to be for all—the humblest as well as the highest. The church members, in their modest little house of worship, were to have the best-equipped minister in all that part of the country. The most worldly-wise shook their heads doubtfully over the final outcome. "He won't stay—we can't keep a man like that," they said. "Rich congregations in the railroad towns will bid so high on him that, in justice to himself, he'll have to go."

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Over this contingency, when his two allies had dolefully broached it, Chapman laughed till his surplus flesh shook like jelly. "I admit that would happen anywhere else under the same circumstances," he said, confidently, "but not in our case. I thought of all that when I first mapped the thing out. He is our man; body and soul he's ours. We picked him up when he couldn't stir a peg and made him what he is. I live here, and intend to spend the rest of my days here, and I have as much right to the pleasure and satisfaction of good preaching as any other man, white or black. No, fellows, don't let that disturb you a single minute. I'm working this thing—I'm working it better, maybe, than you dream of. I'm not talking, mark you; I've got a right to keep some few things to myself—things it wouldn't be becoming of a father to talk about so early in the game. All I will say now is that I give you my personal guarantee that your money—the amount you put in between you—won't be wasted."

"I know what you mean—that is, I *think* I do"—and Strobe tried to wipe the flush of embarrassment out of his hairless pate—"and I wouldn't be one bit afraid that they'd steal our thunder if it was left to Olin himself. He's too *genuine* to be tempted by anybody's wad. From all I hear about him he will want to stay right here where Myra—I mean where all his friends and well-wishers reside. But, you see, Brother Chapman, there is somebody else who, if I am any judge of folks, will have to be considered. There is a power behind that boy's throne. I'm talking now about his mammy. You may try to believe

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she will be contented to let him bloom, fade, and die here in the backwoods, and waste his sweetness on such as us, but she will be heard from. Don't you think so, Brother Lee?"

"Well, I don't know much about women as a general thing," Lee answered, cautiously, as he always did in the presence of the senior partner, "but, Brother Strobe, since you mentioned it awhile back I've had an eye on her. I told my wife what you was afraid of, and put her onto the job, too. My wife is funny. She thinks as quick as a flash of powder, and her decisions come out as straight as a ball from a smooth-bore gun. It is her opinion"—Lee hesitated, and gazed at Strobe half fearfully for a moment, and then looked at Chapman as if unable to conclude.

"Well, well, what *is* her opinion?" Chapman demanded, almost irritably.

"Why, she laughed, she did, and said—and said we all was—was a three-cornered pack of fools. She said Olin was as easy to mold as dough in the tray, but that the Lord Himself couldn't alter his mammy. My wife thinks Sally Dwight has been soured agin things in general, and that she is a woman that is daft to be looked up to. She made a misfit marriage with a half-crazy crank who has been holding her down, and now she is going to rise. She sees her chance in her boy, and she ain't going to lose it. Lord! it looks like you could see from the way she saunters in to meeting in her stiff silk, with her head in the air—looking neither to the right nor left—that she thinks she is better than most of us. What woman in the place is she friendly with?"

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Not one—that is, not one unless it's somebody that will bow and scrape and help her worship Olin."

"Well, all that doesn't mean nothing, either." Chapman was thinking his own private thoughts. "Mothers, schemers or otherwise, may plot and influence, but I'm here to state that the young will have their own way. I am not saying Olin won't get offers, and big ones at that, but he will turn them all down as fast as they bob up. I know what you are afraid of. Didn't his mother have the cheek to hint to me the other day that she regarded what I've done—what we've all done, I mean—as a debt of so many dollars and cents that was accumulating interest and would be squared off the first thing after Olin got to drawing pay! Oh, I've weighed and measured her." Chapman smiled confidently. "You can't tell *me* anything about Sarah Dwight. She's going to make a fight, and she will put up a good one, but the old lady will take a back seat before long and keep it."

It was Tom Mell, the miller, the most outspoken agnostic in the county, who brought the news of Olin's return to Jane Dawson. He was on his way to his mill in his two-horse wagon, and reined in at the fence just beyond which Jane was washing clothes in a cloud of blue smoke and gray steam from the big iron boiling-pot and tub over which she bent.

Mell was a bearded, well-to-do bachelor of sixty years of age, short and heavy. He had blue eyes which constantly twinkled; clear skin, the pinkness of which was accentuated by the flour dust that had worked into the texture of his clothing.

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"The fun's begun," he said, getting down from his wagon and leaning on the fence. "The new savior of the world has come back to perform his miracles in modern, up-to-date fashion. The three wise men have got on clean shirts and are standing in a row at the post-office receiving congratulations and benedictions—the big dog does the barking, the little ones hardly dare to wag their tails. They just look proud and knowing."

"So he's really back?" Jane allowed a cold smile of derision to play over her thin face. "He made quick work of it, didn't he? I saw his mother drive past in the buggy all dressed up early this morning. I reckon she went all the way to Funstown."

"Oh yes"—Mell smiled—"and I reckon she expected to find folks strewing flowers along the road they come back over. She had that look in her face."

"If they passed here going home I haven't seen them." Jane's stare was steady and eagerly inquiring. Her face held no hint of coursing blood; her skin, always like parchment, dry and crinkled, had splotches of brown which deepened the shadows in her sunken cheeks and the hollows of her eyes.

"Oh, they haven't got a chance to get home yet," the miller laughed, merrily. "You see, Tobe Sebastian was bent on having the honor of the new preacher taking his first meal at his hotel, and he made the old lady promise, a week ago, to land him there. It is a great occasion. The front porch is lined with crusty old men, true believers, with pipes in their mouths and flasks in their pockets, and the parlor is full of old maids and widows, and hung

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with evergreens. They say every dog has his day, and if this ain't Sally Dwight's there ain't one in her calendar. I had promised Tobe I'd fetch around a sack of my brag Primrose brand of flour, and when I delivered it I toted it in myself just to get a look about. I've seen a good many pictures of queens, and I can't remember one that wasn't fat. Whether that was due to frills and flounces, hoop-skirts, good grub, or inactivity, I don't know, but I remember I thought Sally looked like one as she sat on a whole sofa to herself, fanning, easy-like, and noddin' now and then, and smiling lofty-like at this one or that, with her little side curls a-dangling. She held the floor. Women was standing leaning agin the walls and hanging to the mantelpiece like they was fagged out, but they didn't dare set in the vacant seats beside her. The organ started up, and hymns was sung, and Olin made a talk. To do that boy justice, Jane, he is plumb sincere. If members and preachers was like him, me and you and George would have to quit talkin'. He hain't got a hypocritical bone in him nor a drop o' stingy blood. I've seen him give away his last cent to a person in need. He never would have got money enough ahead to 'a' gone off to school. If them chumps hadn't furnished it, he'd have still been hoping and praying for what never would have come."

"Yes, he means all he says," Jane admitted, listlessly. One of the stones supporting a leg of her big pot was leaning to one side, and the water was running out into the fire and producing a cloud of murky steam. She ran to the pot and adjusted it.

"What do you think is on tap now?" Mell asked

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her, when she came back, a shadow of dejection on her, a visible droop to her whole body.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't know as I care as much as the weight of a pin what else happens. She has got what she set out to get."

"They are planning a whopping big meeting," the miller grinned. "Is it possible you don't know what all that chopping and nailing means on Silas Dwight's land, over there joining your meadow?"

"I thought he was making a fence." Jane's eyes flashed with curiosity, and then she stared steadily.

"They are building a bush arbor," the miller informed her. "They are going to have an open-air meeting. It begins next Sunday night. The church is too small to hold the multitude they expect. Handbills are being struck off, and fellers on horse-back are going to distribute them on every road and by-path for fifteen miles around. The three wise men put up the money. There must be some truth in the statement that it makes a person happy to do good, for that gang are about the jolliest bunch I ever run across. Chapman takes the biggest slice, and hands the scraps to his pals, but they are plumb satisfied and chaw and swallow with the water of pure joy in their eyes."

Jane turned her face away, and the side of her poke sunbonnet hid her tense profile from the gossip at the fence. She was watching George as he plowed up the red-soiled slope of the distant cotton-field. At moments the young man's body was bent so close to his implement that the outlines of his body were merged into the dun bulk of his horse. "Gee!"

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and "Haw!" constituted the vocabulary of his day from early dawn till dark, and the words now came mellowly to his mother's ears, as if borne on conscious waves of sound through the sunshine which lay like an ineffable veil over the landscape. The light gave life to countless growing, crawling, flying things. It now seemed a pitiless, inexorable curse to one creature of a supposedly higher type. It had given life to her, it was true, and to him who was of her body and soul, but of what value the life it nurtured?

Jane leaned her thin arm on the fence, faced the man, and sighed. "I'm just human, I reckon, Tom—no more nor no less. I'm as apt to show the little mean things that are in me as the things that may be a mite better. I can't help it; I may as well own it; all this hurts me away down inside more than anything that ever happened. You see, that woman has always sneered at my poor boy and what he believes. She put her son up to this thing to humiliate me and George as much as for any other reason. She has always said that a man of George's way of thinking was fit to be nothing but a clodhopper and remain a worker with his hands, and that God Himself was going to elevate her son to a place high among men as a rebuke to me and mine. I didn't believe she'd succeed. I didn't believe folks would be so blind, but they are—they are as eyeless as fish in caverns that never saw a streak of outside light."

"I never could quite make out what was crooked between you two women, nohow," the agnostic said, "and it is just now dawning on me. You are fighting like she-bears over your young—that explains



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a heap. You started in peaceable enough, no doubt, when the two was crawling about in their linsey frocks, with no race between them, except to see which could eat the most dirt; but now the fight is on in earnest. They've split over religion, and the time may come when they may split as wide apart as the poles over—well, over another thing."

Mell's innuendo was certainly plain enough, but it elicited no comment from Jane. Indeed, her tone and manner were that of open evasion. With her long, curved thumb-nail she pried a splinter from the top rail of the fence and put it between her broken teeth.

"Yes, they disagree over religion," she said, and she showed no inclination to go further.

"Well, you needn't let that bother you a minute." The miller was now indirectly sounding his own gong, and his color rose. "George has simply got brains and a head of his own. You don't go about enough, Jane. It would do you good to hear him talk when he is nagged on to it in a crowd. At the mill the other night I just made it my business to study the heads and faces that was there. I'm not saying it because he's your boy, nor because me and him belong to the same stripe, but I'm a liar if them that was respectful of what George said didn't have better-shaped heads and faces less scooped in than the fellows that ripped and ranted so loud over his statements of fact and logic. Don't you be thinking your boy is in such a bad fix, being almost alone agin such overpowering numbers." Mell sent his glance after hers to the lone plowman in the distance. "He's all right, and will *be* all right.

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I've heard him say time and ag'in that God—or the great first cause, as he puts it—means all human suffering to be the soil out of which plants of good and vast beauty grow. If you wanted to, you might apply that to your own case. No doubt it was—was"—the miller was seeking delicacy of expression—"your own misfortune coming on you when you was so young and helpless, that opened your eyes to greater truths than the average person is able to see."

"Maybe, maybe." Jane shrugged her thin shoulders. It was as if she had no desire to pursue the line Mell was taking. "And yet," she added, firmly and with a little wry twist of her lips, which she stroked with her hand as her eyes bore down on him with the light of infinite soul-hunger in their depths—"and yet; Tom, suffering produces hate—hate so strong and burning that it dries up every bit of good-will in a human soul. George hasn't had as much pain as, no doubt, will come his way. I hope he'll be spared—I do—I do; but I don't see no way to avoid the trouble that must be his. We see plants grow; we see more like them spring up from the same soil. I've seen my—my misery take root and sprout, and grow strong in the soil and air supplied to it. Tom Mell, I see my boy's future agony coming as plain as any cloud that ever swept across that sky. I would kill myself by inches to ward it off. I would enter the gates of the burning hell these fools believe so much in, and I'd go with a song and shout of joy if by that I could buy my child's release."

"I'll tell you"—Mell tried to speak with comfort

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and lightness—"you need some of George's philosophy. Trouble comes to them that believe in it, that open the door to it, so to speak. I tell you, George's way of thinking is a heap more satisfaction to him than you dream of. He is a king of the intellect here in these mountains. You wouldn't, maybe, be so discouraged if you knew how many folks there are in the world that think as you and I do. I never have told you about my trip to New Orleans. Lord, that *was* a treat. I had to go to see about some city lots I owned there, and as I'd never been in a big place I made a two-weeks' stay of it. There was plenty of shows, Frenchy joints, and beer-gardens to go to, and sights galore. Sunday was just like any other day—a sort of Jewish holiday—with every thing wide open. I could have amused myself the first Sunday in a lot of ways, but, Jane, I went to meeting. I had heard that there was a Unitarian church there, and I was dead curious to find myself for once in life in a congregation of folks believing like we do. Say, Jane, you'd 'a' been astounded. I know I was. Talk about your churches—that edifice was ahead of anything that Funstown ever dreamed of erecting. It was a great, whopping big thing, with picture windows, and carpets as thick as a mattress, not only in the aisles but between the benches. They had soft things for you to kneel on and velvet cushions under and back of you that rested you and made you feel good. Well, knowing how such folks are regarded here, I half-way expected to see a lot of convicts in short hair and striped clothes come in to worship; but, bless your life, the women had on silks and satins and furs

## Jane Dawson

and diamonds and pearls, and the men wore plug-hats, stiff shirts, and looked like Wall Street bankers on parade. Fine horses and carriages driv' by coons in uniform rolled up and unloaded at the door, and everybody was smiling and saying 'Howdy do?' and bowing to one another at the steps and shaking hands in good-fellowship. A young chap at the door with a rose in his buttonhole put himself out, by hunkey, to show me a seat, and he led me to as good a one as there was to be had, right close up to the pulpit. There was a fine organ—the finest you ever laid eyes on—with gold pipes, stationed right back of the stand, and in front of it was a row of singers and a fellow with a bugle and another with a fiddle. There must have been some understanding in the congregation, for, when the row of singers begun, nobody in the house joined in. They had it their own way, and I was glad, powerful glad, they wasn't disturbed, for if ever you heard singing that *was* singing, that bunch done it. Why, Jane, it was just like—if I can find any way to describe it—just like the males with bass and tenor, and the women with treble, both keen and medium, was one single person letting it all out from one pair of lungs. It was by all odds the sweetest strains ever bound and twisted together. By gum, I cried—I couldn't help it. You know it was a new thing—to be where I could think in my own way and feel respectable, too. Somehow, them singers and players seemed to be for me as much as any of the rest, and I felt proud and happy both. Then come the sermon! The preacher was a comfortable-looking chap with a fine face and gentle, womanish voice. What he said was purty

## Jane Dawson

much on the line of the articles George and you get, but it was the first time I'd ever heard the like in a pulpit. When it was over and all of them was leaving, the preacher singled me out, being so close, I reckon, and motioned me to wait. Then he scrambled down the side steps and come and shook hands with me and said he was glad to see me out. He had watched me, he said, all through his talk and saw that I was a new-comer and a good listener.

"I ain't afraid of strangers, as a general thing, but he seemed so slick and fine and had such a keen eye that my tongue got sorter tied. However, I told him he was the first preacher of his sort that I'd ever heard talk, and that it had been a treat to me. He seemed tickled, and insisted on me going to his she-bang through a side door, and we went into the finest house made to live in, I reckon, that I ever saw. It was kinder dark and shady, but he felt around for a button and, as quick as a flash, the whole thing was ablaze with light. He made me set down and begun to ask questions about what folks up here believe, and said he didn't know that there was any people on earth that still swallowed the whole thing. He touched a bell on his desk, and a fat Dutch girl in a white nightcap and apron come as quick as if she'd jumped out of a corner.

"What is it, sir?" she wanted to know, and he said:

"Bring us something.' That was all, he said, just 'Bring us *something*,' and when she had slipped through a door I heard a sound like a shot from a pop-gun and a fizzing noise, and in she came with a

## Jane Dawson

waiter full of sandwiches and a bottle with the cork out. He poured me out a glass of the slickest wine that ever slid down a human throat. He was hungry, and I was too, and between us we emptied the plate. I know I felt lively, and I let myself go, and told him all the funny things I could think of about these folks. What I told him about the three wise men and the preacher they was educating, interested him more than all the rest. He wanted to know all about Chapman and Olin's mammy and daddy, and laughed till he cried. He said if I'd only turn my attention to it I could get rich delivering lectures. I reckon he was full of that wine or he wouldn't have been so complimentary, but he said he had to laugh at every word I uttered. He quit laughing, though, when I come to the part about George and you. His face changed, and he looked serious, and he sighed several times."

"You oughtn't have brought us in," Jane said, sensitively.

"It had to come in," the miller defended himself. "That was the thing that capped the stack, and if you'd been there, Jane, you wouldn't have minded it. You'd have been pleased by what he said about your boy.

"'He's a brave young man,' he said, 'and I wish I could see him. I'd like to take him by the hand and encourage him to keep on. He is living up to his lights, and his reward is sure to come.'"

"Did he say that?" Jane inquired, under her breath, her tone eager and hungry, a dumb stare in her eyes. "But he don't know—oh, he don't know! No doubt you made him understand part of the situ-

## Jane Dawson

ation, but not all. He could never dream of it being just as it is, for even you don't know all."

"Maybe not," Mell admitted, awkwardly, conscious of the delicate questions involved. A negro was driving past on a load of lumber. "Planks to make seats for the arbor," he put in. "That is Chapman's team, and the timber is from Lee's saw-mill. They are going to have a high old time. You ought to take it in, Jane. It's right at your door. Well, I must be going."

Jane turned back to her pot, and with her battling-stick punched and pried the steam-puffed, boiling things. "It's Sarah Dwight's day," she said, bitterly. "It's her day, and her sun is at its height. She's laughed, she's taunted, she's threatened that it would be like this, and she knew what she was talking about. Her boy is looked on as a king in royal robes. Weak as he is in mind, that's where they have put him. He will ride about and read and study in the shade, while George, *my* boy"—she stood erect, enveloped in steam and smoke, and gazed steadily, her breast rising and falling, at the lone toiler in the sun. Dropping her stick, she went into the house to attend to something she was cooking. Fires of rage and despair smouldered within her. She was the type of woman who, had she been free from the bonds of hereditary Puritanism which she was unable to wholly sever, would have slain her betrayer. And the moment for the actual deed had never approached so near as now.


"They'd all better look out," she muttered. "I can stand just so much and no more. I'd like to see them wiped off the earth, and I can do it; but

## Jane Dawson

no, no, no! There is George, and it would kill him. It is queer, but he is rising above hate and revenge. His misfortune seems to have sweetened him, while mine has made me a raging demon."



## CHAPTER X

UNDAY came, the weather was cool and clear. The air had the crisp, bracing quality of high altitudes. Objects at a great distance seemed to be drawn closer, as if the atmosphere were a mighty, blue-tinted lens through which the vision passed.

During the long afternoon Jane and George sat under the branches of the big spreading beach at the side of the house, and read their books and the latest issues of the papers and magazines which came to them from the great outside world. This, to Jane, had been a favorite occupation which had furnished a twofold delight, that of seeing her son's mind expand in knowledge ungrasped by her enemies, and the subtle gratification over the natural belief in her and his mental superiority. But to-day she read listlessly, her eyes often on his face, her restless glance sweeping the road which led past her gate to the bush-arbor hard by. Already vehicles of various sorts, laden to their full capacity with mountain people, were passing on the way to the new meeting-ground. Across her meadow, part of which had been mown, she could see horses and mules being tethered to the trees, and even to her own fence. The smoke of camp-fires twisted up-

## Jane Dawson

ward, and canvas tents and the white hoods of many wagons dotted the hitherto undisturbed silvan scene. Once, and once only, did she go to that side of her house from which she could see the Dwight homestead. The front veranda and lawn faced her, and she was a witness for a morbid moment to the signs of unusual social activity about the place. The veranda was filled by young and old in their best attire. Couples sat on the steps and leaned on the white paling fence. Within the house some one was playing the organ, and a hymn was being sung. Chapman and his two aids stood on the grass, their heads together. Olin and his mother sat side by side on the veranda. Jane could see her enemy's triumph in the very satisfied sway of her short, round body as she rocked back and forth in her easy-chair. Jane saw one other person. She saw Silas Dwight in his Sunday clothes—a white shirt, black neck-tie, and threadbare broad-cloth coat—leave the house by the door in the rear and pick his way through his vegetable garden to his barn-yard. He entered the barn, stooping at the low doorway, and disappeared.

"Going there to find company of horses, cows, and sheep," Jane muttered. "They don't want him at the house, and he knows it. Their joy is his damnation, and he knows that, too."

Later Jane went to her kitchen to prepare supper. It was sundown in the lowlands, but the mountain-tops were still resplendent under the yellow rays which brought out the rugged cliffs, craggy boulders, and gnarled, vine-choked trees.

George was still reading in the deepening gray

## Jane Dawson

light, when, looking up, he saw Myra Chapman approaching.

"Don't get up!" she cried, a delicate flush on her face. "I only dropped in for a minute. I was passing and saw you, and couldn't resist the temptation to come and jerk that bad book from your eyes. I know it is bad or you wouldn't be so absorbed. You will ruin your sight poring over fine print in a light like this."

He was standing, the closed book held tightly in an awkward clasp, and she sank into the chair his mother had vacated.

"Sit down," Myra went on, with a pretty smile and half-playful tone; but when he had obeyed and sat leaning toward her, his elbows on his knees, he saw a serious expression sweep over her sensitive face. "I know I am intruding, George, but still I couldn't stay away. I felt that it was my duty to speak to you, and so I came right in."

"You know I am always glad to see you." His manly voice shook with restrained passion. "There was never a time—there could *never* be a time, Myra, when—"

"Never mind, then, I'll believe you," she broke in, "but I'm worried more than I ever was in my life. Listen, George; I am sure you would be sorry for me if you only knew how much trouble I'm in, and—and *you* are the cause of it." She held up her hand protestingly as he was about to speak and hurried on: "Yes, you are the main cause of it. I awoke this morning with the first sign of daylight, and lay awake thinking, thinking, thinking."

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A crisis seems to have come in your life, George, a big, important crisis."

"Oh, you mean Olin's return—Olin's great success at school, and—"

"I mean this and nothing else," she took him up quickly. "I've never had but two boy friends that I cared about—you and Olin. I've tried to be true to both of you. I have seen you play together as happy, jolly boys, and I saw you get older and begin to grow apart, till now—"

"Now you see him on top." George tried to smile and jest, though his tone was bitter. "You see him fairly flapping his wings in triumph, as he soars above the multitude which adores him."

"Well, yes," the girl answered, slowly, "I see that he is popular, and I see something else—something connected with it all that has made me unhappy. George, you were not among his old friends who came forward to congratulate him the other day. He feels hurt. He tells me that you barely spoke to him, and even then you made a light allusion to his work, which pained him deeply."

"I'm only human, only a natural man," George answered, doggedly. There was a downward drawing of the corners of his strong mouth, a shadow of defeat in his big, earnest eyes. "I suppose, humble toiler in the fields though I am, that I have *some* sort of aspiration planted within me. Olin has his convictions, and I have mine. He thinks one thing is truth, and I another. I would not be a natural man if I could be glad to see him winning honor upon honor, joy upon joy, out of what I know to be error—blind, stupid error."

## Jane Dawson

"The greatest error of all is that which leads two friends to part," Myra said, firmly. "Disagreement over such things is bad enough among strangers, but to allow dislike to creep in where there should be nothing but love is terrible. George, I've come to tell you something, to prepare you for something unpleasant. I don't know how it will affect you, but I am afraid if you are not very forbearing it will be the cause of you and Olin— George, since he came home his mother, and perhaps others, have convinced him that your influence is bad on the rising generation, and that it is his duty to attack you publicly. He hasn't said a word to me about it, but I can see by the way he avoids the subject that he is deeply disturbed over it, and he may—really, I am afraid he may—"

"Oh, I see, I see," George said, with a forced smile. "Well, I was half prepared for it. Lee and Strobe hinted yesterday that somebody was going to make it hot for me from now on."

Myra remained with her head lowered for a moment as if in deep thought. It was growing darker. Jane had lighted a candle, and its rays, broken by her uncouth shadow, flashed across the grass as she moved about in the kitchen.

"I can only say I am sorry and troubled," Myra resumed, suddenly. "I find it pretty hard to be patient with you, too. I can't see, even if you are convinced of the strange things you say you believe, why you insist on telling them to others who are happy in their own faith."

"You say that to me, Myra"—George struck his knee with his closed book as if to emphasize his

## Jane Dawson

words—"when you are sending money to foreign countries to tear down the honest belief of the people and establish your own."

"That's different," Myra answered. "It is my religion. It is the faith of my people. It gives me great hope, great joy, and I want others to have the same benefits."

"Strange as it may seem to you, I feel that my belief is my religion, too," George replied. "You will be unable to see how that could be. I am not against your religion. I am only in favor of helping it progress as it has progressed in the past. Strictly orthodox believers in every age have bitterly fought advancement. Not even the most ignorant man in these mountains now believes in witches, and yet I was reading the other day in an old law-book that in trying persons for witchcraft the judges in charging the juries used to cite the Bible as the authority for the belief in the existence and power of witches."

"Well, even that may be true, but what has that to do with us to-day?" Myra demanded. "*We* don't believe in witches."

"No, but I am afraid you believe and practise things that are almost as much opposed to spiritual progress—in a *broad* sense. Look at the overflowing joy of these people because they are going to outstrip their neighbors with a new preacher. Are they thinking as much about the humility and love for suffering mankind that it is his duty to preach and theirs to act upon? Are they thinking of any *new* light his learning may throw on the mystery of life? Will his coming back lead them to be kinder to the suffering? Will it tear the scales from

## Jane Dawson

their sight so they can see the bleeding hearts of those they have persecuted for years, and understand the wrong they have done and are doing?"

His voice had become low and husky. His eyes were fastened on the window, against which the elongated shadow of his mother appeared like the silhouette of some mythical crone bending over a fire and stirring a pot.

"Oh, George, that is what I hope," Myra said, a catch in her voice. "Olin is so good, so unselfish. I know you must be thinking of—of your mother, and you will let me say that he told me the other day that she had been treated outrageously. In fact, he felt that she had been driven to unbelief by the unkindness of her neighbors."

"Olin means well," George admitted, "but he will become like all the rest. They are made by a machine, and they become parts of it. His mother will manage him. He is her life and ambition. She has no sympathy for human beings in general. They are trash under her feet. She always resented my friendship for him. She passes me now without speaking."

"That is because she thinks you are opposing him," Myra explained. "She knows what you believe, and, of course—"

"No, she was *always* that way," George broke in. "Even when we were children she used to call him away when we were playing together. I've gone to bed many a night crying over things she said to him in my presence."

"I wish I could understand you thoroughly," Myra said, after a moment's silence. "You seem to be so

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sincere, and so terribly in earnest, but I can't understand. You seem so good—so very good—and yet you *do* inflict pain. George, my faith in Christ is like—well, like your beautiful faith in your mother. You don't like to see her maligned, and I can't bear to have any one speak ill of Him who has done so much for me."

"If you could only understand, Myra"—his voice shook under stress of his great earnestness—"that I am not speaking *against* Him, but, as I see it, *for* Him. Listen, and don't oppose me even in your mind till I have finished, for it is so clear, it is so reasonable. Away back two thousand years ago a great man was born. In all ages, in all countries, certain men have stood out among their fellows for their wisdom, their insight, their genius. Shakspeare was a marvel of skill and intelligence, and yet no one claimed that he was a god. But this man I am speaking about in particular was a genius in another way. He comprehended better than any one who has ever lived what was wrong with the world, and He set about earnestly trying to correct it. He did His best, but the evil of humanity rolled over Him like a wave of liquid lead and crushed hope and life out of Him. Then years passed. His wonderful teachings were remembered, and men began to say that no mere human being could have had such an exalted spirit, and that He was, therefore, God Himself in human guise. They told of miracles that He had performed, of His upsetting the infinite laws of nature, such as bringing the dead back to life. Now, my contention is that those claims of supernatural power have done the cause of Christ



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more harm than good. I see evidences of it here every day. I know a man who has so closely obeyed the rules of his creed that he boasts of absolute sanctification, and yet he hates one of his neighbors. I heard Mell tell him one day that Christ could not hate anybody, and he answered: 'No, because Christ was the Son of God.' Don't you see, Myra? Don't you see how the benefit of Christ's great life example is lost on a creed-bound man like that? Suppose a brave general of an army were leading his men into the thick of the fight, and suppose they all fell back and said: 'The reason he is so fearless is that he is a god and not a human being like we are. He may do it, but *we* can't.' Wouldn't that be unfair to the general? There is a man alive to-day who was once very rich, but he has nothing now, for he has given it all away to the poor, because he loves humanity and pities the suffering and the unfortunate. He happens not to be an orthodox Christian. He believes Christ was a man in the sense that I believe he was a man, and he is following His example to the best of his ability. But this man is utterly despised by the orthodox, and why? Simply because he is telling them that they can and should live as Christ lived. They think I am a bad influence here, that I teach what is bad for the young, but as God is my Judge, I feel that the things I believe are really ennobling. Trouble and sympathy for—my mother may have opened my eyes to these things; but as I see it, the narrow faith of these people seems to be the stumbling-block between them and real advancement. You see, Myra, so many of them are taught that faith is the chief

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thing—that simply to believe in their redemption by another will save them—that they rely upon the letter of that law and remain inactive. Why, it is simply pitiful to me to see how far they are from seeing the greatest truth that was ever given to mankind. Olin is starting this big meeting to-night. What will be his chief plea? He will beg them to believe—simply believe, and continue to believe. They will be happy; they will shout and sing and clap their hands with joy, and to-morrow they will be as blind as ever to their real duty, to the real lasting joy of a genuine spiritual life. They don't know it, but they have simply taken an easy way to salvation—by putting their burden on the shoulders of another. There is a higher reward for true charity, for genuine self-sacrifice, but they are missing it. They are blind, blind, and there is no one to open their eyes."

Myra had covered her face with her hands and sat motionless. She was so still that she seemed scarcely to breathe. When he had concluded, she looked up. Even in the dusk he could see the spiritual glow which played like reflected light over her features, making her more beautiful than he had ever seen her before.

"You have shown me one important thing," she said, in a soft, appealing tone. "You have shown me that there is a weak point in the lives of these people. Their faith is not wrong, but *they* are—they *must* be, or a man as just and discerning as you are would not think as you do in their midst. George, George, don't hold their religion responsible for their shortcomings. The world is full of Christians who

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try to live as Christ lived. I think Olin is like that, and I, myself, intend from now on to live a truer, higher life."

"Don't—don't say that!" George protested. "I never think of you in connection with the others. You are the exception which proves my rule. If the others were like you I'd never criticize them. You are the—the only one"—there was a catch in his voice, and he cleared his throat and locked his strong hands tightly over his book—"the only one here who has been kind to my mother. Do you know when you first came into our house that day several years ago, in your short dress and your hair in a plait down your back, it was to me like a vision of something supernatural. It was the first time in all my life that I had seen any one from the outside under our roof. I felt—I felt—I don't know how I felt. I was startled. I was amazed. I saw the queer look struggling on my mother's face—heard a new intonation in her voice when you had spoken so sweetly, so kindly. Since then she has admired you—in fact, really loved you. Time after time when I have heard her expressing her religious views I have seen her check herself and sigh, and say: 'But, after all, Myra believes it, and what more could anybody ask of a human being than to be like she is?' And as for me"—the voice of the speaker became unsteady again—"I need not say I would go to the ends of the earth to serve you. I can never hope to repay you, never, never while life lasts."

"You are praising me too much," Myra faltered. "I went to see your mother then because I liked

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her. I go now because I love her, because I begin to think I understand her, and because, sometimes, I think she needs me. Young as I am, she seems to need me. She is lonely—the loneliest soul I ever knew. But I must go now. I see she has taken the candle into the dining-room. She will call you in a minute.”

George stood and watched her as she tripped across the turf to the gate. His mother was standing in the kitchen doorway, but he did not see her. She waited a moment, and then she came out to him. He was standing like a figure carved in stone, his eyes on vacancy, when she touched his arm. He looked around, and their eyes met.

“Supper is ready,” she said. “I saw you talking to Myra and waited till she left. I’d have asked her in to eat with us, but I was afraid she’d refuse—I mean I was afraid she’d be wanted at home, as it’s Sunday, and visitors are likely to be there. I reckon she wanted you to go to the meeting. I could see she was talking mighty earnest.”

As they walked toward the house he told her what Myra had said about the young minister’s possible intentions in regard to himself. Jane drew back from him and stood perfectly still, her features working visibly.


“Oh,” she said, “I see. I see. It’s begun, already begun. But he’s not to blame for it. Olin’s too weak and wishy-washy and good-natured to think of such a thing. He’s a cat’s-paw—the paw of a she-cat that is hiding behind him. I’ll tell you,

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George, I'll put up with just so much from that woman, and not a bit more. Even a worm will turn, and so will I."

She suddenly lowered her head, tightened her lips, and led him, wondering over her agitation, into the house.

## CHAPTER XI

 UPPER was over. Jane washed the dishes and put them away. She prepared her yeast for the next morning and left it to rise in the brown crock on the warm hearthstone in front of the burning fire. Then she went to the front door and looked about for the glow of her son's pipe, the thing which, as a rule, at that hour, was always a cheering signal to his whereabouts. But it was not to be seen. She went to the side door and peered up and down. She walked round the house, her skirt catching and holding the dew which it swept from the grass. Still she saw nothing of him. She called out, at first in a low tone, and then more loudly. There was no response. She leaned heavily on the gate, a cold, premonitory thrill passing through her body.

"He's gone to the arbor," she said. "He was ashamed to tell me he was going, but he couldn't keep away after Myra told him Olin was going to pounce on him. I don't blame him. He's like me. I'd want to be on hand at such a time. I'd want to hear exactly what was said and how it was put. George isn't afraid of anything that ever walked the earth—man or beast—and this fellow had better mind what he is about."

## Jane Dawson

A wagon filled with persons bound for the bush-arbor was approaching. A cloud of dust raised by the hoofs of the trotting horses hovered over it. An unfamiliar voice was speaking, and Jane, blending so perfectly with the fence that she was not observed, saw the driver wave his hand toward her house.

"There's where the old hag lives," he said. "They say she hasn't been to meeting for twenty-odd years. Well, she will get a dose of preaching now, with the arbor right at her door. They say young Dwight's voice will reach a mile. If he don't rope her in and stop her gab she'll go headlong to damnation."

Another voice was replying, but the rumbling wheels of the receding wagon swallowed up the words. The dust was wafted over the grim listener. She felt its fine grit between her teeth. She spat and wiped her lips on her apron. She hesitated a moment, her glance now on the lights in and about the arbor. Then, drawing her sunbonnet over the sides of her face, she trudged across her back yard, climbed the zigzag rail fence, and lowered herself into the weeds and briers of her meadow. Over this rugged plot of ground she picked her way, avoiding pools, quagmires, and half-buried boulders, her eyes fixed on the flare of lights ahead. Presently she found herself in the edge of a little sassafras copice within fifty feet of the crudely improvised pulpit. Some mules and horses were haltered close by. They were eating oats in broken bundles on the ground, making low, champing sounds, pawing the earth, and rattling the chains of their harness.

Jane, from her hiding-place, was able to look straight into the faces of the expectant and chatter-

## Jane Dawson

ing congregation. There rose to view the smiling, satisfied visage of an enemy, there another full of festive piety, there a group of her neighbors, their countenances aglow. There was no one as yet on the platform which contained the preacher's stand. The long, backless bench made of unplanned planks behind it was empty. But it was only for a moment, for Chapman and Lee and Strobe advanced up the straw-strewn central aisle, ascended the steps, and seated themselves in a pompous row. Chapman got up a moment later to adjust the smoking wick of the glass lamp on the stand, and, blinking under his heavy brows, he rearranged the ponderous Bible and ostentatiously filled the pitcher with water from a pail brought by a boy.

But these details scarcely caught the grim watcher's attention. She had her eyes on the main entrance of the arbor. She knew Sarah Dwight would accompany Olin. She would have staked her life as a wager on that point, but the father—Silas Dwight—what part would he take in the proceedings? There was a commotion in the group at the entrance, and Olin and his mother emerged from the outer shadows into the yellow light. She held his arm, her placid face aflame with a pride she could not have quenched. Perhaps Jane alone felt and observed the woman's air of gracious condescension as she smiled and bowed to this one or that. Hands were eagerly thrust out from both sides of the aisle to grasp the hands of the young preacher; the outer edges of the congregation rose and swerved forward in worshipful eagerness. The boldest shouted out words of welcome; hats, fans, handkerchiefs were



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waved; some of the older men cried out, "Amen! Amen! God bless the boy!"

The iron of ineffable derision had entered the soul of the woman peering from her material and spiritual shadows. The calamity which she had dreaded for years was at hand. She was losing the fight. Sarah Dwight, calm, self-possessed, and as purposeful as all persons favored by Fate are purposeful, was winning. Great politician that she was, she had taken the popular side of the issue. But *was* she winning? Could she win with open error as her support, when it was said that Truth could never die? Ah, yes, Sarah Dwight had reckoned well! Success was hers beyond a doubt—earthly success, at all events, and what else counted? As for the woman's son—Jane's nostrils opened wide in a snort of sheer contempt. She told herself in her rage that he was a mere babbling infant in the lap of a scheming nurse—a puppet, a jumping-jack, a woman in man's clothing with his long hair, beardless face, thin lips, and soft voice. "Huh! he can't hold a candle to George, my fine, tall boy, with his strong body and muscles of steel. George was made to talk to reasoning men, men of brains and power, not to silly women and sniffing girls anxious to be redeemed and hugged at the same time. If George had his rights, he'd be a governor, a senator, a—a— But he will never have his rights! He'll always be what he is, a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. Silas Dwight made him such, and such he has to remain."

Jane moved forward till she leaned on the bed of an empty wagon. A horse was eating shelled corn from a trough swung to the end of it, and his nose

## Jane Dawson

touched her elbow, but she paid no attention to it, for Myra Chapman, accompanied by her mother, had entered the arbor and was being deferentially led by a farmer in his shirt-sleeves to a seat near the stand.

"The girl don't know which she likes the best, George or Olin," Jane said in her throat. "She is between the two, and knocked right and left, but she will decide before long. This hullabaloo to-night may clinch it. Poor George! that will be another load for him to tote or sink under. Myra may believe all the fool things she wants to believe and still he will be her slave—yes, he'll be that to the end of his days. Looks like he's in a dream when she is near him. As for me, I'd stand anything better than to see her turn away from him for that puny fellow, and yet she'll have to—my God! she will have to—for a hundred reasons she'll have to."

Jane moved backward and sat down on the grass. The congregation was standing and lustily singing a hymn. To the crushed woman it was the battle-song of a triumphant army that had swept her all into oblivion. She clinched her hands; she ground her teeth; she drew her thin knees up against her chest and rocked her rage, as if it were an infant athirst for her barren breast. Something like a sob hung in her throat, a sob which burned and seared like a living coal of fire.

The song was over. There was a rustling of straw under the feet of the congregation, the creaking of planks, as the people sat down. Then all was as still as the night which lay upon the surrounding fields and meadows. It was now as dark to Jane's

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senses as if she were in a dungeon, for her fingers were pressed into the hollows of her eyes and her face was buried in her lap. The silence was broken by a voice which rang out as clearly and distinctly as the tones of a perfect bell. It was a manly, courageous voice trained to modulation and directness. Even to unwilling ears it carried conviction of vast intrinsic power. Olin Dwight was praying. He was thanking God for the blessed opportunity given him of being once more among the people he loved and longed to serve. He had come back to the glorious mountains he had missed in his absence, and hoped there to remain and do his life's work toward the salvation of his fellow-men. For certain reasons he felt that he was needed at Shelby more than anywhere else.

Hearing a breaking of twigs on the ground behind her, Jane looked up and saw a form approaching. It was that of a man bowed toward the earth, and who walked with careful, tentative step, muttering and casting glances about him as if fearful of being seen. He did not notice the crouching woman in her colorless dress, and the shadow that was over her. He stood for a moment surveying the congregation, and then with a deep sigh he sank on the ground only a few feet from Jane. The ground was strewn with dry, aromatic pine-needles, and on his all-fours he raked them together till he had made a bed of them. Then with a groan he reclined upon it, his head thrown back, his legs and arms extended prone upon the earth. Jane had recognized the man's outlines; she knew the sigh, the droop of guilty agony. Without rising, but with a hand

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touching the ground on either side of her, and while his face was averted, she slowly edged her body along till she was within reach of his hand. She touched it. He turned his head and looked at her; his mouth fell open, a gasp of amazement issued from his lips.

"Is that you, Jane?" he asked. "You?"

"Yes, it's me, Silas Dwight—just me."

He sat up like a mechanical thing, the joints of which all but creaked. He locked his long hands in front of him, and continued to stare as a man waking from horrible dreams to reality more horrible. He was silent, watching her lips, which he knew could drop nothing but denunciation.

"What was you jabbering to yourself just now?" she demanded. "Say, tell me!"

"I was—I was—praying, Jane," Silas made reluctant reply. "I was praying. These days I pray nearly every breath I draw."

"Humph!" she sneered, and she lowered her head and allowed it to rock to and fro in well-balanced derision. "You was praying to a God that will laugh at you. He's laughed at *me*, why wouldn't he at a dirty whelp like you? Folks say I don't believe *anything*, but I believe there is a heaven and a hell—don't you listen to 'em when they say I don't. I do. I don't believe in a hell of just plain, every-day fire, but I do in the flames that are lapping about your soul right now."

She saw him shudder even in the faint light that was on him. He stared at her as if appealing for mercy, and then, relinquishing all hope in that direction under her pitiless glare, he looked down.

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"There isn't nothing I can say—nothing," he gulped. "God knows I wish there was."

"You ought to be young again on a night like this," Jane pursued, sardonically. "You ought to be there in the shoes of your legal son. You'd have a fine harvest of trusting young women, who'd give their souls and bodies to you in a faith not born of earth, but eternal in the skies. You are God-cursed, if ever a man was. You wear the stamp of damnation on every ounce of flesh that sticks to your rotting bones. Your sin is to live after you for eternity and bow down the shoulders of the innocent. Look at it. Here is one son you put high in the world—one wife you gave to decency and public respect. To-night she's a strutting queen; her son's a prince. But what about the other two—the two you wiped your filthy feet on? She's hated and despised, avoided like an unclean thing kept outside the city's walls, and he is—he is—you know what he is. I needn't tell you; you know he is a giant among men who would be a ruler of men if he'd ever had his rights."

"Oh, Jane—Jane Dawson, for God's sake—"

"That's it—Dawson, Dawson!" Jane slapped her thigh and laughed harshly. "I've heard that folks used to put red letters on women who was disgraced, but what worse tag could a woman of forty need in any community than bearing her father's name and have a son the world is forced to look at? I've read of no end of cases where women have killed their seducers and got joy out of the job, but I am not allowed even that. The stain of blood on my hands would be wiped off on my help-

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less child. You needn't shrink—you needn't shiver. I'll never harm a hair of your head. I came near it, though. I came near it when I found out that—that you told her. You devil in the shape of a man, you told that woman about—you and me."

She paused, out of breath. He met her fierce eyes with the glazed stare of a dead man. His lips shook. "I didn't, Jane, I didn't—that is—"

"You lie, you whelp—you dare to lie looking me straight in the face?"

"She accused me," Silas groaned. "She had been talking to you one day and come home and faced me with it all of a sudden. I said nothin', but she kept saying it. She stuck to it. She was in an awful tantrum. She raged and screamed. She—she threatened to take Olin and go off and make a public scandal. She said if I'd admit it she'd let it drop and—and hold her tongue. I thought you'd prefer that. I knew you'd rather die than have George know the truth, or to have anybody else know it, and so—"

"So you let her scare it out of you? She was only guessing. She knew she could work you, coward that you are, and she did, and from that day on her one aim in life has been to raise her son higher than mine, and, if such as this to-night counts, she's doing it." Jane waved her hand toward the arbor and added: "Listen, just listen to the *Reverend Mister Dwight*. Look at the poor thing with his arms spread out like a buzzard settling over dead hogs. Take a look at Sarah with her sickening face raised up to his like she was Mary, the Mother of God, with a halo on her head, and he was the Saviour of man. Huh, huh!"

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Silas followed her eyes into the flare of light over the heads of the crowd, but he was silent, dumb as an unborn creature under her spell. She put out her hand and clutched his arm.

"Look good!" she demanded. "There is another face I want you to see. It is one that is going to play a big part in the game when me and you and Sarah are rotting in the ground. It's Myra Chapman. They both love her. Which will get her, nobody yet knows. She's a gem of a woman. I'll say that for her. She will do what is right according to her lights. Look at her now. She is drinking in that poor fool's words as if they was honey dripping from the comb of heaven. There! there's George." She pointed a stiff hand toward the edge of the crowd massed behind the benches and almost obscured by the darkness. "I thought he would come. He's standing there with Tom Mell. Look! Tom's nudging him and laughing. You can count on Mell having his fun at such a time as this. He happens to have brains. He's been about over the civilized country and read books and heard big men talk. He don't believe black is white just because some sap-headed preacher said so. He thinks for himself, as I do, and as my boy does, and will do on to the end."

"Jane, Jane—" began Silas, falteringly, but she cut him short.

"Don't *Jane* me!" she cried. "I've been called Jane Dawson till I hate the sound of it. Even the fat thing you married is '*Mrs.*' Dwight. Her boy didn't have to hear his mother spoke of like a nigger wench all through his childhood till he was old

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enough to understand. The day he came home from school and asked me what a—what a ‘woods’ colt’ meant, and said one of the boys had called him that, I cursed you as the arch-fiend of the universe. There is one thing, Silas Dwight, that I’ve got to know—I’ll know it if I hound your steps till you topple into the grave.”

“What is it, Ja—what is it?” He caught himself up. “I’ll tell you anything, anything in my power. I’ll *do* anything. I’ll *say* anything. I’d go any distance to accommodate you. My sin has killed all the evil passion I ever had. I am not the same man in that way. I’d give the rest of my life to blot out—”

“Stop that!” Her voice rose like a scream that broke and died in her throat. “I don’t want the smidgin of a favor from you. This ain’t no favor—it’s my right. You’ve told her about *me*. You’ve got to tell me about *her*—and I’m sure there must be something. I’ve always wanted the plumb straight of the thing. It is a late day, but I’ll have it. You went over to her home after—after you made me them promises and ran off. You got married there in a powerful hurry. I want to know the reason of the hurry. I want to know this. I’ve never looked her in the face when she was sneering at me without wanting to know it. Knowing the sort of man you was—what you was after when you went with young girls—I didn’t know but what—Silas Dwight, I want to know—I *will* know—” Jane dropped her eyes to her lap. She took a fold of her skirt between her fingers and twisted it. She was silent. Her breath seemed to have left her.



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"What is it you want to know?" he faltered. "Oh, God, what is it? What is it?"

She still remained silent. He saw her put her hand to her throat and stroke it, as if something there gave her pain. Her hand slid down to her breast and paused, but she failed to speak. Olin's voice in a melodious burst of eloquence rang out on the still air. Chapman's sonorous "Amen!" sanctioned the sentiment. The bonfires of pine-knots at the four corners of the arbor sent up their spirals of burning soot and gave out a red glare, making the trees of the forest seem lurking, curious creatures drawn thither from the mystic outer void.

"If you want to know why we got married so quick—so unexpected-like," Silas began, tentatively, "why—"

"Yes, that's exactly what I've wanted to know all these years," Jane broke in. "But I want the whole truth, nothing but the truth. I want the truth about her from your mouth, as you give her the truth about me. She threatened to scream, to make a scandal. I can't do that, but it would be a satisfaction to me, myself. You see, I've stood her contempt as long as I'm able, and I want to know *every single thing!*"

"Well, you see," Silas answered, "her father was opposed to our engagement. I'd as well admit I was bound to her by promise when I walked home with you that night. But never mind that." Jane had lowered her head, and he could not see her eyes, and feared another outburst. "The old man was opposed—he was dead set against it. He'd heard things—I know he accused me—well, he accused me

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of going with too many different girls. Then he took sick. The doctor told him he couldn't live, and he got bothered about me and Sarah. He sent a man on horseback for me, leading a horse for me to ride. It was after dark at the time. I couldn't imagine what had happened, and the man couldn't tell me much. When we got to the house Sarah and her mother were crying and taking on. The old man asked them to fetch me to his bedside. I went in, and he held out his hand and made me set down close to him. He said he hadn't meant no harm to me in what he had done and said—that he was only trying to protect Sarah's interests. He said he was going to die and wanted the whole thing off his mind, and that he'd sent for a preacher and a license and he wanted us to be married then and there."

"Oh, I see; I see, he'd got on to it!" Jane stared at him now, her wan face tense with eagerness. "Maybe that's what made him sick—I know my father—but go on, go on! You say he wanted the knot tied as quick as possible, and I reckon it was done right then?"

"Yes, inside of an hour. I've always wanted to tell you how it was, Jane, for I reckon if he had not done that maybe me and Sarah would not have married. I was awful fickle in them days. It seems to me that I couldn't make love to a pretty girl without promising everything under the sun, and I'm ashamed now to say I broke off with several, or let them get mad and do it. But there was no way out of this."

"I know. I see." Jane's voice still rang with some new-found delight he was unable to fathom.

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"We may think it was her father's doings, but, knowing that woman as I know her now, I'd stake my life on her being at the bottom of the trick to rope you in. She had to do it to save her honor, and—"

"Save her honor?" Silas groped for the meaning of her words and the weird ring of satisfaction in her voice. "You mean she didn't want folks to say she'd been flirted with? I see. Well, Sarah *was* awful proud, and she *had* told a good many in the settlement."

"I mean she wanted to hide her *shame*!" Jane blurted out. "You know well enough what I mean." She was now staring at him with a growing fear in her widening eyes. "You know you got her in the same fix you got me in. You know that as well as you know anything, and you've got to say so, wife or no wife. Proud and stuck up as she is, you've got to be as plain with me about her as you was about me to her. I got wind of it all. You needn't shift and shirk. I heard how early she was confined after you got married, and I always was sure—sure from the way she deviled me that she was as black a kettle as I was a pot."

"Oh, Jane, you are mistaken—awfully mistaken!" Silas stammered. "There wasn't nothing like that. As God is my Judge, there wasn't. She was as cold and calculating a girl as she is now a woman, and—and even if I had tried—"

Jane was ghastly pale. She stared into his face as if picking up the separate threads of its texture and examining them one by one.


"Then *that* wasn't so!" she gasped. "I haven't got even *that* to hold to, *not even that*?"

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It was as if sheer dismay had deprived her of further utterance, or of any thought worth uttering. She drew her feet up under her, and rose and stood like a wraith above him.

He put out a hand and clutched her skirt, his lips writhing under an unutterable prayer to her for mercy, but she snatched it from his grasp. A snarl like that of an infuriated dog escaped her. She backed away from him, and in a moment was lost from his view amid the stalwart pines.

## CHAPTER XII

LBERT PETIGREE kept the chief general merchandise store at Shelby. It was directly opposite the courthouse and next door to the post-office, in the rear of which a crippled veteran of the Confederate army had a shoe-shop. The store was a narrow one-story house a hundred feet long. It had a porch in front, at one end of which was a well of pure freestone water, to which many of the villagers came and filled their pails, the public spring behind the church going dry at times.

Petigree had the diplomacy of a born purveyor of mankind in general. He was "on the fence" when it came to the question of which side was right in the religious discussions which took place in the back part of his store on rainy days when the soil was too wet for the farmers to work, or of an evening when the labor of the day was ended. Some of his critics, who charged him with being all but criminal in his coldness and inactivity in church matters, hinted that Petigree was afraid of offending Tom Mell, who turned a good deal of business toward him from his mill down the road, and was lending him money at a low rate of interest.

"I'm just this way, boys," Petigree used to say to the arguing group, "I'm open to conviction; what

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is said pro and con is powerfully interesting to me. It makes life worth living to hear you fellows wrangle. By gum, I didn't know there was so many conflicting ideas floating about till you got to tilting at one another." He would stroke his heavy brown mustache, and his blue eyes would twinkle shrewdly as he sat on the end of a counter swinging his long legs in evident enjoyment of his mental opportunities, and finish as he always finished any comment of his on the situation: "You see, you've got nothing to lose by your stand, and it's bread and meat with me. You just let these folks get wind of any report that I'm out and out agin church matters, and Chapman or Lee or Strobe, or somebody else, will open a store on the corner and stand in the street and warn folks away from me as they would from smallpox or a mad dog. You see," he said, one day when Mell wasn't present, "I ain't a free man like Tom, who owns the only water-power anywhere around. He may think it is powerful brave of him—I like Tom, understand that, boys—he may think it is powerful brave of him," I say, "to go about flinging rocks at folks' sacred belief, but even Tom would say less if he didn't control things in his line. They can't do without his meal and flour, and so they say Tom's cranky, and laugh and let it go at that. But keep it up; keep the ball rolling. I'm willing to furnish lamplight and fire-wood. Talk about the shows they have over at Funstown in their new opera-house—dancing gals, high-heel kickers, and what not—I've had fun right here in this shack that I wouldn't swap for any sport a man ever run across.

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Did you-uns ever think of it? There is a kind o' fun that is fun, pure and straight, which at the same time makes you study and think like rips. I reckon the fun of a leg-show or nigger minstrel is ended when you leave the seat you paid for; but I've gone home, many and many a night, and laid in bed and shook with laugh so hard that the slats fell out, and it has always been in thinking about the way one of you fellows hit at another. Take Tom Mell, for instance—now I'm not citing Tom because I say I agree with him, you understand, but I've seen Tom arguing with Strobe or Lee and heard him say things with a straight face that would make a sick dog laugh. Take the tale he told about Noah's gals getting him drunk. That was the funniest yarn I ever heard. Tom says the Lord wasn't on to Noah's bad habits, or He wouldn't have made him the captain of that boat and left all the rest with nothing to cling to."

Myra Chapman went to the store on the afternoon following the first bush-arbor meeting. She had made a small purchase and was returning when she saw George Dawson mending his fence at the roadside. The sun was down, and the mountain shadows were stretching eastward across the fields. He glanced up and saw her, and his color rose, as it seemed to her observant eyes always to rise at her approach.

"It's time for you to quit work," she chided him, gently, as she slowly studied his strong face.

"I've just finished," he answered, the embarrassed deference still on him, as he lowered his axe to the ground and leaned his red hands on its handle.

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"I saw this hole this morning, and determined to close it before night. The hogs get in and go for my goobers and potatoes."

She was not looking directly at him when she spoke the next time. She glanced up the lonely road and then down it, and said:

"I saw you at the arbor last night, George."

"You did? Why, I didn't go in; I only—"

"I know. I looked and looked till I found you. Somehow I thought you'd go. I saw you with Mr. Mell in the crowd outside. I could see he was making light of it all, though I never saw you look more serious. It seemed to me as if you wanted him to keep quiet. Oh, George, you don't know what a sad expression you have at times—I mean when you think no one is observing you."

Intent upon the general trend of her thought, he seemed not to have caught her personal allusion.

"Yes, I went," he said, swinging the handle of his axe to and fro. "Mell came by home and wanted me to go look on. We both thought Olin intended to say something about me. Mell had heard some talk, and from what you said to me, I supposed—"

"I know—I know," Myra broke in, quickly. "Olin was at our house when I got home after I left you. I—I talked with him. I tried to show him that such a thing could only cause strife and hard feeling. He did not see it my way at all, and wouldn't promise anything. It seems that his mother and my father and several others are counting on him to—to attack the—the unbelief that is growing up here. He refused to promise anything at all, and left me. I thought he was angry, but last



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night, when he and his mother came up the aisle, he slipped me a note. In it he said I needn't fear."

"Then you saved me." George's brow was clouded, his lip curled sarcastically. "I ought to be very, very grateful. You prevented the dear boy from wiping up the ground with me."

Myra put her hand on his arm gently and looked into his burning eyes. A confident smile played over her pretty lips. Her voice was sweet and low and soothing.

"I prevented him from making you mad and rousing the worst that is in your nature. Your looks at this moment, at the bare mention of the thing, shows what you'd be if—if he actually attacked you publicly."

The young man's countenance cleared against his will. He was not proof against the spiritual force which seemed to emanate from the girl's being like rays of sunshine.

"You read me mighty well," he admitted, half smiling, "and I am always preaching self-control."

"Why shouldn't I know you both pretty well?" Myra asked. "I've studied you and Olin since you were boys. I used to keep down rows between you, and I must continue at it. I am working for your interest and his. It seems queer to be saying it to you, but I want him to succeed in his work. I want him to go to the top, and—oh, George, I want you, also, to have every good thing in life. I want it. I want it. I think about it more perhaps—I mean, I am more worried over you right now than I am over him, because *you* are at a turning-point; you've

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reached a crisis in your life, and he has already made a start in a safe direction."

"Oh yes, the machine will look out for him," George sneered again. "He'll have no trouble. All he will have to do is to keep on teaching the infant class the same old fairy tales till he is superannuated. After that he will draw pay for a while, and finally accept the reward that is eternal in the skies."

"Stop!" the girl commanded, her fine eyes flashing. "I don't like you a bit when you are that way. I can't stand it. I believe what I believe with all my heart and soul, and it shocks and pains me to have you sneer at it."

"Forgive me; I couldn't help it," George said, quickly. "I suppose I am getting bitter. I long for things—I hardly know what they are, but I am hungry for at least a square deal. I can't help believing as I do. Your God and mine made me as I am—filled me with the very ideas you think are so blasphemous, but which, to me, mean *life*."

"Stop, George!" Myra said, more gently. She put her hand on his and pressed it anxiously. "You must listen to reason. I want you to be happy, and there is only one way—only one. Every day, every night, I pray for your peace of mind and happiness, but you *can't* be happy while you are tearing down the hope of others. Take away the simple faith of these people and you rob them of all they have. You knock the crutch from under the lame. Listen! do you hear that singing? It is the old Fox sisters in their poor hut behind our house. They've never been to a town larger than Funstown. They've only seen a railroad twice in their lives, and hardly

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know the war is over. They can't read or write, and know nothing of the great world outside of these hills and mountains. They were near me last night at meeting. They sat holding each other's hands while Olin was talking. I wish you could have seen them, for you have a heart full of sympathy. They shouted, and tears of joy rolled down their wrinkled faces. George, if Olin's voice never reaches another human ear he will not have lived in vain. To steal money from those old women would be wrong; to take their faith from them would be worse, for they have nothing else. Olin told me of a man he met at college who, he said, was the most miserable human being he ever knew. He had been religious and led a contented life, but he got to reading books on free thought and became an agnostic. He grew morbid and miserable, and never had a moment's peace of mind. He tried to go back to the faith of his childhood, but he couldn't—he had lost it forever."

"I know—I understand," George admitted, deeply interested. "Such things are the queer contradictions we are always meeting. You can tell me with all that force and sweet sympathy that I ought to stifle my convictions as to truth, while Emerson says it is a man's duty to cry his honest opinions from a housetop. I want people to believe as you do who get comfort out of it, but there must be something higher and deeper for those who simply can't accept the strictly orthodox creed. I ought to stop right here and not try to prove that I am right, but I do want you to respect my views more than you do. I wish I could give you an idea

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of what an agnostic—no, not merely an agnostic, but a *reverent* agnostic—hopes for.”

“I’m afraid they don’t know *what* they hope for,” Myra sighed, a frown of conviction on her face. “If they themselves could tell, it would be different; but they can’t—they are at sea in a very frail boat.”

George seemed scarcely to have heard her words, so intent was he on illustrating his meaning. He stood looking at the ground for a moment, then he said:

“I’ll try to give you an example. Let’s call it a modern parable. Suppose a very rich man—a man with all the wealth of the world at his disposal—were to spend his life building a palace. Suppose we have reasons for believing that it is as perfect as human ingenuity and skill can possibly make it. Then suppose we are invited some dark night to visit it—you and I and others. Suppose we are admitted into a cheerless outer room, a room quite small, without windows through which we could look out, and floor and walls of plain stone. Then suppose we are told to wait there in total darkness—that the owner is not yet ready to admit us to the wonder and splendor of the lighted interior. Then, suppose we all sit speculating on what we are to see, and some one speaks—Olin, for example. He tells us that he knows precisely what is to be shown to us. It is like the inside of other large houses which he has seen—a wall is here, a picture or a fountain there. It has windows, doors, balconies, arches, columns, statues of exactly such and such size and material. Then suppose most of those who are listening to him say, ‘Yes, yes, it is like

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that; it must be like that! But suppose there are a *few* in the group—a very few—who sit silent and say to themselves, 'No, it can't be so, for the builder is no ordinary one. He had all the money of the world at his command, all the brains, all the genius, and what he has built as his masterpiece must be different from anything our eyes have ever beheld.' Now, as we sit there in ignorance of what is to come, Myra, tell me who would have the greater expectations, those who insist on seeing something like they have seen before, or those who simply wait for a revelation in keeping with their highest ideals?"

"I see what you mean," Myra answered, but her brow was wrinkled by sheer opposition. She sighed and slowly shook her head. "Your example is one-sided. It fits your view perfectly, and illustrates your point, in a way, but it isn't good. Of course, you are likening your builder to the Creator, who you, yourself, admit must be all goodness, all kindness, all generosity, all power."

"Yes, yes, of course," George said.

"Then you failed." Myra smiled frankly up in his face. "You failed to make your builder powerful enough, or even kind enough. You see, to personify God, he should not only have built the palace, but have made the minds and bodies of his visitors. Don't you think, in that case, that it would be unkind of him to give a chosen few of his guests—you and Mr. Mell, for instance—keener perceptive powers than all the others?"

George saw her point, and laughed good-naturedly. "You have an answer ready for everything. There is no use trying to show you what I mean. I am

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glad you don't attend our meetings. You ought to be a lawyer."

"My point is this," Myra pursued, "and I don't believe you or any one can deny the truth of it: the positive idea church people have of what the next life is like is quite as good for them as your unsettled one would be. I am satisfied that they are happier than persons who are groping in the dark. George, you are not happy, and Olin is."

A storm-cloud brooded over the young farmer's face.

"I'll admit that," he said, gloomily. "With all my hope as to the final equality of mankind, I want some things, at least for myself, which I'll never get. There are moments when I am almost an anarchist. I am maddened at the very natural laws which brought me into such a life as this. I have seen nothing but suffering since I toddled from the cradle, nothing but injustice and cruelty gnawing at the vitals of a helpless woman. I feel like"—his gaze fell fiercely on her sweet, shrinking face; she saw that he was quivering from head to foot—"I feel like tearing the heart out of me that yearns for things which will be forever out of my reach. I feel like a primitive man who grabs by the throat the creature who robs him of his own. Do you think I can take pleasure in psalm-singing—that I can believe in an easy road to bliss for a favored few—when I know what my road and hers has been, and is to be, on and on to the end?"

"Oh, George, George, you hurt me—you hurt me!" the girl cried, her handkerchief on her twitching lips.

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"Forgive me," he panted, and then he stood with closed mouth, breathing heavily through his nostrils, his great breast rising and falling. The village church bell began to ring out its announcement of the next meeting at the arbor. The shadows had deepened about them. They could almost see the dampness of the dew on the blackberry vines and velvet mullein stalks in the fence-corners. It seemed to lay the dust on the parched road which stretched up the hill to their homes. She broke the silence.

"I am not going to give up," she said, falteringly, her eyes averted from his now regretful gaze. "At present you are at war with all about you, but God won't let it continue so. You'll stop fighting, and in the end all will be right."

"Stop fighting?" he said, incredulously.

"Yes, you must—you simply must," Myra answered, tremulously. "Oh, George, I can see—I think I can see—how all the good things of life may be yours in the end, if you will only not continue to antagonize people about you. You stand alone. You are the mark for every arrow, and you are already wounded. If you would give up they would think all the more of you. Even my father"—she averted her flushed face and finished awkwardly—"I mean that it pains me to feel that—that you and he are almost at daggers' points."

"I know—I know, and it is bad," he admitted, his warm, grateful gaze bearing down upon her face.

"The time may come when"—her voice had fallen to a murmur that was all but drowned by the distant

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tinkling of cow-bells, the barking of dogs, the crowing of cocks—"the time may come when you may meet some good Christian girl that you would care for very, very much, and she could not possibly—" Myra's low voice died out on the waveless air.

"I have"—something clogged his utterance—"already given that up—placed it beside my other misfortunes. There are men in isolated cases who have no right to marry. Only those who can transmit a legal name have the social right in a strictly orthodox community where all other sins are so easily forgiven. No, I scarcely think of it now. I don't allow myself to. Though I'll tell you, Myra, the thing creeps upon me sometimes in my sleep. I have dreams—dreams in which I seem like other men, in which my mother is like other women. Oh, the dreams—the dreams! I sometimes hope that there will be an after-life made up of such dreams as I have had."

They had been strolling homeward, and had reached the point at which their ways parted. She put out her hand and pressed his convulsively. Her eyes were full of tears.


"I must go in," she said, smothering a sob, her lips quivering. "Come to the arbor to-night, George, won't you?"

"Perhaps," he answered, searching her eyes for a solution of the mystery of her visible emotion. "I may go, even if I don't sit with the elect."

"I shall look for you," Myra said, ignoring his sarcasm, and she turned away abruptly. "But don't make fun, George—this time don't laugh at us."



## CHAPTER XIII

FTER supper that evening George sat on the vine-grown porch smoking his pipe. The second ringing of the church bell had just died out. The arbor, in plain view across the undulating wheat and cotton fields, was lighted. Persons afoot, in vehicles of all sorts, and astride tired work horses and mules, passed in a constant current. Merry laughter and snatches of plantation melodies fell on the ears of the unobserved spectator. Presently his mother came from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I hardly think so. Are you?"

"I think I will," she answered. "I wouldn't be caught dead in open company with such folks; but I know a place where I can hide and hear all that's going on, and slip away when I feel like it."

She disappeared in the house. The light went out. He heard the door in the rear close softly, and knew that she was already on her way. He remembered a book he had to read, and searched his pockets for a match with which to light the lamp in his room. He found the match and was rising, when he heard voices on the road. Peering through the vines he

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saw a couple walking arm in arm. The woman's head was close to the shoulder of her escort. George held his breath, for it was Myra who was speaking:

"It was the finest sermon I ever heard. Oh, Olin, I was so happy that I cried. I couldn't help it. I was so proud of you,"

"I was watching you," Olin Dwight's voice replied. "I saw you were touched, and that seemed to inspire me. The desire to please you has done more to make me what I am than all else, and—" George strained his ears for a continuation of the impassioned words, but a clattering wagon filled with hymn-singers was passing, and he heard no more.

He went to his room and tried to read one of the ponderous law-books which he was studying in view of a future career. At times the singing of the multitude—the crude harmony of it—stirred him strangely.

"There's a land that is fairer than day,  
And by faith we shall see it afar."

"Yes, that's it in a nutshell," he replied to the song, as he rested his head on the open book and sighed. "Faith, faith!—Faith in promises stamped in cold type which form translated and retranslated lies. Belief that the kicks of this life will be the caresses of the next—that—that— My God, her head was almost on his shoulder! He has pleased her! She said she was proud of him. In time she will consent to be his—"

He closed his book, blew down the chimney of the lamp, and groped from the room into the narrow

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hallway and thence out under the stars. He took a deep breath; he folded his arms and stood rigid, his gaze on the lights in and about the arbor.

"Yes, he has pleased her; his God has made it easy for him. I could please her, too, by lying in word, deed, and look; but *my* God won't let me lie to any human soul, much less to *her*, who is the very flower of truth. No, we are parted forever. She is on one side of a chasm and I on another. With that maddening blaze on her heavenly face she has beckoned to me. She is in terror lest I fall—the sweet thing thinks my soul will be lost. Well, isn't it? Could I bear to exist, anywhere, in any condition, and know that she was in—in another man's arms?"

He walked on till he had reached the rail fence which separated his mother's land from the ground occupied by the arbor. He was standing there when his attention was attracted by a low laugh, a low, bitter, half-smothered laugh which he would have known among thousands. It was his mother's; but she was not in sight. Moving farther down the fence in the direction from which the sound had come, he found her behind a clump of sassafras bushes, seated on the ground and peering through a crack between the rails. She had ceased laughing, and was softly muttering to herself. Parting the bushes, he touched her bonneted head, and she looked up with a start and a low ejaculation of alarm which gave way to a laugh of relief.

"You scared me, you scamp!" she said, playfully.

"You mustn't sit on the ground like that," he

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reproached her. "Get up. It will make you sick again."

Without protest she rose and pushed her way through the bushes to his side. "I've certainly had enough of this tomfoolery," she sniggered. "Of all the silly things that human beings ever said, I've heard them to - night. How long have you been here?"

"Only a minute." He held her arm and was gently leading her homeward.

"I've seen most of it," she ran on, glibly. "I saw his Highness, the young Prince, arrive. He came with Myra. His mammy was as mad as a wet hen. She wanted the honor of strutting in with him again, but Myra cut her out. Sarah came with the Chapmans. Boy, let me predict something—you say I'm good at it. Well, it won't be long before that woman will raise out-and-out objections to Myra. She knows Myra is good enough for him in every way, and suitable, too, but she is so jealous of her that she can't see straight. Besides, she will want him to look higher. I tell you she's built that way, if ever a woman was. She thinks he is going to be a great preacher, and she'll want him to tie up with some rich man's daughter. You wait and see. There will be a split betwixt her and Olin, as sure as fate, for he is dead in love. He has pride in all this hullabaloo, and is putting his best in his preaching; but Myra is as much or more to him. As for her, I haven't made up my mind yet. She's too deep for me, as well as I know her; but I'll tell you one thing, she isn't so sweet and kind to me for nothing. If she could be bought like

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a slave on the block, I might expect her to see to the buttering of her bread; but she is simply herself, through and through. She will go where her heart leads her, and be her own boss, too."

"What were you laughing at just now?" There was evidence in his tone and manner that he wanted to avoid a painful subject. She stared at him from beneath her sunbonnet for a studious moment, and then she answered:

"At Olin's fool talk and the funny look on Tom Mell's face. Tom had come straight from the mill without combing his hair, brushing his beard, or changing his clothes. He was on a side bench under a light, all covered with meal dust, and I could see him as plain as day. You know he has a habit, when he is interested in what is being said—a habit of twisting his mouth about and repeating the words. He was doing that to-night, and looked powerful funny, sometimes grinning, and sometimes just sitting with his mouth open. I tell you there are no ifs and ands about Olin's preaching. He caught me to-night, as much against him as I am. Yes, for a while he fairly lifted me off my feet. He got away up on stilts of oratory, and was describing the scene where Christ raised Lazarus from the dead. I give Olin credit for it, true or untrue, it was the prettiest story, as he told it, that I ever heard fall from human lips. No wonder the folks yelled out 'Amen' and 'God bless you!' I felt like saying something myself. I actually choked up. My eyes were plumb full of tears. That boy is a poet; he can make anything pretty that he talks about. He made me clean forget myself; he made me forget

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to reason. He made me actually see with his eyes the whole thing away back there in the Holy Land. For once I didn't want to doubt. I said to myself—I said: 'Here is the thing me and George and Mell and all the rest who are curious—the writers of great books, and searchers into the mystery of life—are looking for.' All of us want to know what lies beyond the black veil and cold river of death. People have died—passed on, or been snuffed out like a candle for ages and ages—and not one has come back to tell what happened afterward. 'But here's a man, at last,' I said, for I seemed to be in a trance, deep and sweet and uplifting—'here's Lazarus, who has actually been dead. His body has laid in the grave four whole days while his soul was free in the other life. Now,' I said to myself, 'Olin is going on to tell what Lazarus saw in that other life. Folks as anxious then as they are now are going to gather around the resurrected man and beg for information on the great unanswered question. Mothers just parted from their children—lovers from their sweethearts—will dog his steps from place to place pleading for news of their lost ones.' I must have been mesmerized by Olin's voice and happy face. He made me see the very mound on the grave burst and the dirt roll away as the Master with a great light on His face stood with His hands stretched out. I saw Lazarus as plain as I see you at this minute, as he rose from the clods that had been over him. His body was bound about with grave-clothes, and his face covered with a napkin. I heard the sobs of the people; saw the astonished faces of them that looked on, and then I come to myself, for Olin

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had stopped—stopped short off, and was talking about something else. *Something else!* Just think of it! The writers of that tale could record all them little, puny, every-day things and never once touch on the main question—never once even *think* of it. That's when I laughed. I was sold completely. What a blind, stupid, unthinking lot to swallow a thing as important as that without question! And what better proof could we have that the Bible don't tell all we want to know—that it only goes as far as man's brain could go at the time it was written, and not an inch further?

"Hush, listen!" Jane turned about suddenly and faced the lights of the arbor. "Olin's calling up mourners. They will go in solid droves to-night. Did you ever in your life see the beat of it? They call a shindig like that getting religion—they call it following in the footsteps of the meek and lowly Jesus. George, as I understand Him, He'd turn sick at the sight of it. Two thousand years have passed since He went about and plead and preached, and this sort of a thing has been the outgrowth of His teachings. Blind, blind, oh, they are blind! They will weep to-night till their duds are soaked full of brine, and to-morrow they will hate and back-bite and slander and cheat and kill in cold blood."

"Come on." George drew her forward gently. "You are shivering. You are not strong enough to stand exposure like this."

She laughed reminiscently, clutched his arm affectionately, and allowed him to lead her home.

## CHAPTER XIV



THE meeting had been over a month. One evening, as was his custom at home, Olin read to his mother and father from the Bible, making comments on various passages which called for special elucidation. Silas sat in the shadow of the chimney-corner, his chair tilted back against the wall, his rough-shod feet planted squarely in front of him. His wife sat close to her son, her fond eyes and ears drinking in his every movement and word. Now and then she would rest her dimpled, ringed hand on his knee and utter some satisfied approval, or offer a suggestion that this or that quotation would make a suitable text for a sermon or form a telling illustration.

The reading was always followed by a prayer, led by Olin as a rule, sometimes by his calm and dispassionate mother, but never by Silas, who had ceased to be a mystery to his wife and son. He was simply a backslider, a type of being not uncommon in such communities—a person who had once been in full communion with the Spirit, but had fallen from grace and could not conscientiously claim the right to reinstatement. Such persons were not always doubters of the great and vital truths of Biblical lore, but only of their own



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spiritual attainments. By some ardent adherents they were pitied as being sorely in need of aid and guidance, by others despised as brands which could not be snatched from the burning without injury to the rescuer. Silas Dwight came near receiving the combined contempt of all classes of religionists, for, to say the least, he was an ungainly blot on his son's triumph and his wife's devotion to the cause.

On this particular evening, when prayer was over, Silas rose from his knees and went outside the house. He was alone by the well in the back yard when Olin approached him.

"Is that you, father?" the young man asked, peering through the darkness.

"Yes; what is it?" Silas answered, with a disagreeable start.

"I wanted to speak to you," the minister brought out, slowly. He advanced deliberately, sat on the brick curbing of the well, and put his hand on the wooden windlass. "I waited till mother went to her room. It was something I wanted to say, just to you alone."

Had it been lighter, the marks of open terror on Silas's face would have been observable. He was afraid he knew not what of. His brooding solitude had given him over to certain superstitions and intangible fears which at the present moment sprang upon him as from the encroaching shadows of actual insanity. He tried to formulate some casual reply, but was afraid to trust his voice to utterance. He had but one thought. Olin had discovered his secret, and was coming both as an emissary of God

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and man to see him about it, to demand a reckoning, in some form or other.

"Father, I hardly know how to say it," the young man began, "for, of course, the matter lies between you and your Maker, but I was talking with Tom Mell this afternoon, and he—"

"Tom Mell!" burst in a gasp from Silas's rigid lips. "What's *he* got to do with—?" Thoughts of the miller's frequent visits to Jane and her son shot through his brain. She had told. Her health was failing. She had told Mell the truth, and Mell had taken the awful revelation to Olin, and now—now!

"Yes," Olin pursued, gently. "You see, he never lets an opportunity slip by to joke about religion, and at Petigree's store he began again laughing about your contempt for all I preach and stand for in the community. He said that it was known to be a fact that the children of a minister are less religious than the children of other men, because the children of preachers see the hypocrisy of the profession at home. He said I had no children, but that my father, being on the inside, looked on all my pretensions as a joke, or simply as a selfish ambition, and would have nothing to do with me or it."

"Oh, oh!" Silas's relief was as buoyant as gas in heavy air. "He said that—Tom said that, did he? Huh, he said that!"

"Yes; and, of course, as you can see, it is humiliating. In fact, he is not the only one. Brother Chapman spoke to me of your coldness to my first big meeting, when everybody else was so

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much interested and benefited. Somebody spoke to the Presiding Elder about it, and, as delicately as he could, he told me last Sunday at Funstown that it was getting to be awkward for all concerned."

"What do you want me to do?" Silas, now rid of the worst of his fears, showed more calmness.

"I don't see how I can dictate to you," the minister answered. "You ought to know best, now that you fully understand the situation and realize your duty to God and—all of us."

"It isn't as easy as you think," Silas faintly contended. "I want to get right—I want to be like the rest of you, but I don't know how. I've done every single thing you told me to do, but still feel the same. You say God forgives sin and wipes it plumb out if a body only asks. I've asked and asked. I've stayed on my knees for hours on a stretch, and plead and plead, only to get up feeling the same, exactly the same."

"You make too serious a matter of it," Olin said, hopefully. "It is so simple that a child can understand. You are sorry for every thing you ever did that was wrong, are you not?"

"Yes, yes, of course. A fool would know that."

"And you've made up your mind to lead a better life from now on?"

"Yes, yes; oh yes!"

"Then there is nothing else for you to do."

"You think not—huh! you think not?"

"No, your sins have been forgiven you. Through the blood of Jesus, who died for you, you are redeemed. He suffered, bled, and died on the cross for the whole sinful world."

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"I understand." A sigh deep and long followed the words. "But what if—if—" Silas's mouth hung open. He stood staring helplessly at his would-be comforter.

"If *what*?" The young man was losing patience in the face of so much that to his buoyant optimism was crass stubbornness.

"What if," Silas stumbled on, now eager for information—"what if you got a thought in your head some way or other—maybe from hearing such folks as Mell talk their views—that as long as the—the consequence of your sin continued about you—stared you in the face, met you at every turn—I say, when it's *that* way, and you've got any heart at all, how are you going to feel good and safe and sound, and believe that somebody else lifted the load off your shoulders and left it on them that you wronged. Of course"—Silas steered sharply from the peril of exposure into which his impulse had led him—"I'm only supposing a case. You see, I've heard preachers as well read in Scripture as you are contend that there is a point—not often, but *sometimes* a point—at which the Lord Himself throws a man over, quits bothering about him, and shuts him out. Some call it sinning against the Holy Ghost. I reckon if there's one *known* way of sinning against the Holy Ghost there may be several."

"I see what you mean." But Olin really didn't. "You think you have had your back turned upon your Maker so long that you have injured your chances of securing a full and complete pardon. The feeling does you credit, but you must quit bothering about it. Keep on asking God to reinstate

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you; live as He commands you to live, and you will come out all right. I'm glad I had this talk with you. I see now that you want—earnestly want—to be one of us, and that is the main thing. Father, I want to say something else. It is about myself this time. You and Brother Chapman have not been friends for many years, and it pains me for it to be so. I am sure you can guess why?"

Silas hung his head. He shuddered. Again those guilty fears of disaster hovered over him. Before his mental sight a scene flashed as quickly as a spot blazed by lightning on the trunk of a mountain tree. He saw George Dawson on the roadside, as he had seen him one day talking with Myra—the day he had first read the young man's heart secret. And now this other son, favored of himself, favored of man and God, was about to reveal that which would forever blight the life of the other. He saw George Dawson as he heard the verdict; he saw light and life go out of the manly face he had learned to love and yearn for. Silas drew himself up to his full height. Hot blood bounded in his veins.

"Go on!" he gulped. "Go on, what about her—well, what about her?"

"Father, my hopes are bound up in Myra," Olin went on. "She is the one I need above all others in my lifework. She has done more for me than any one else. She has always encouraged me; she had a lot to do with her father's advancing that money, though he doesn't really know it."

"I know—I know"—Silas laid an impatient, throbbing hand on his son's shoulder—"I know all

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that, but what does *she* say—what—what choice does *she* intend to make?"

"As to that, I don't know yet. You see—"

"Ah, you say you don't!" The note of relief in the old man's voice would have struck one less self-absorbed than Olin. "Then it ain't settled, *plumb* settled?"

"N-o; she puzzles me at times. She doesn't like to talk about an engagement. She keeps putting me off—telling me that it is too early to think of such a serious step, and for a certain delicate reason I can't insist right now. Father, can you imagine what that reason is?"

"No, I can't." Silas was still reveling in the discovery he had made. "Women are funny—wishy-washy and notionate. I reckon you think it is best to let 'em alone till they make up their minds plumb good and sound."

"Father, the reason that I don't go right ahead and insist on a positive answer, is that I am in debt to her father and—"

"Oh, you think you'd better square that little matter off first." Silas was now sure of his ground. "I must say you are looking at that right, plumb right. Daddy-in-laws—such as Chapman would make, anyway—with his high and mighty style of laying down the law to all about him—are bad enough without having him constantly throwing your debt in your face. Yes, you are doing well now, and I'd say it wouldn't be many years before you could get together enough to—"

"Father, I can't wait. The situation, as it is, is upsetting me. I want to feel free to go to Myra

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wholly unhampered. Perhaps it is unbecoming of me to say it, but, as you know, there was a lot of open criticism of you for allowing others to advance that money, and I thought, now that you see the funds were not ill-spent, that you might at least lend me enough to—”

“Me?” Silas now fairly snorted. “Me advance money for—for the like of that? No, sir-ee, I can’t and I won’t! You and Chapman and the whole caboodle of you may scramble and fight it out among you. I’d have to sell my mountain tract. I’d have to— Well, I’m simply not going to put in a cent—not a single red cent. She can marry—Myra can marry somebody that’s out of debt, by gum! She might find somebody that was under no obligations to anybody, nor wouldn’t be. Maybe she knows what she wants better than you do. I don’t say she does. I don’t pretend to understand her or any other woman, but—well, you needn’t come to me for money, now or any time.”

“Father, wait a minute—you don’t understand. Surely—”

But Silas had turned, and was sullenly striding away in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XV



THE next morning after this George went to Mell's mill on horseback. He had behind his saddle a bag of selected corn which was to be ground into meal. The merry miller saw him through the open doorway and came down the steps and threw the bag of corn onto his shoulder.

"Hitch and come in," he said, his smile breaking the powdery coating on his round cheeks. "You are the one man on earth I want to see to-day. I was on the point of shutting down and going to your house. I am bothered, and the more I think of the dern thing the more I worry over it."

He turned into the mill and ascended the short flight of steps to the large hopper, into which he emptied the bag of corn. When George had disposed of his horse and entered the mill, he found his friend bending over the long, smooth trough testing the warm meal as it poured from the wooden spout. The ponderous wheel outside the building was rumbling, the cogs and axles beneath the floor were creaking, and the water from the sluice made a swishing, rushing sound. Seeing him at his side, Mell put his hand on his arm and drew him to the doorway, where his voice would be more audible.

"George," he began, a sheepish expression in his



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eyes, "I reckon a lot of liberties is taken in the name of friendship, and I'm afraid I've made a king-fool of myself. I'll tell you how it is. I reckon you'll think I want to boss you—own you body and soul—but it was all due to my great pride in you and your big brain. I won't beat about the bush. Yesterday I was at Petigree's store, and Chapman and Lee and Strobe come in and begun to shoot off their mouths about how they was running things. I hadn't ever made a pass at them, and wasn't intending to start no argument. I was buying some nails, and Petigree was weighing them in the scoop, when all three of them literally pounced on me, a-giggling and a-tittering and throwing out insinuations. For one thing, Chapman 'lowed I had a sorter hang-dog look, and had had ever since the big bush-arbor blow-out. He said—and Strobe fairly doubled up laughing—that me and you and our little gang would have to move out, that we was plumb laid on the shelf. Well, one thing brought on another, till Chapman said that he'd heard a lot about your views, but that you never had been honest enough to express them in public where there was anybody educated enough to clean up the earth with you. He said his man had been waiting for a chance to get at you in public debate, but that you was afraid of your rickety platform—that you had nothing that you'd stand for out in the open. I got hot—I oughtn't to, but I couldn't help it. I said some pretty sharp things that must have rankled, for Chapman raged around on a high horse and laid his pocketbook on the counter and said he'd give away all it contained to any cause whatsoever if anything under the sun

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would induce you to open your mouth. Right then and there he made an appointment for a meeting between you and Olin next Tuesday night at the school-house. If I hadn't been mad I would have been more cautious, but before I knew what I was doing I had you billed, booked, and dated for a speech. I gave him my word for it that you would be on hand cocked and primed. He was to introduce *his* man and I was to introduce *mine*."

"Good gracious!" George exclaimed, crestfallen, "I can't do a thing like that. I can talk to a few of you at the store, or here, but before a crowd like that would be, why—"

George's voice died out. The miller groaned and looked down; his kindly lip was twitching under blended chagrin and disappointment.

"I knew you'd say that," he said. "I laid awake nearly all last night bothering over it. The more I thought of it the worse I felt. Chapman and the other two went down the street telling everybody they met, and I was in an inch of running after them and taking it all back, but I didn't actually have the courage to do it. You see, I had said flat down that I'd produce you without a shadow of a doubt, and I couldn't face their ridicule. I let 'em go. I even stuck it out before Petigree and some others, who dropped in to get the straight of it. George, you've got to kick me—that's all there is about it. Nothing else will satisfy me; I'm going to double up right here and let you go at it; but I will have you know that it wasn't anything but my pride in you and your logic and wide knowledge that made me go so far. When I've heard you talk

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in your smooth, wonderful way about the truth as you see it, I have wanted time after time to have Chapman and his lay-out hear you. Oh, George, we are in a fix! If you back down—or, rather, if I do, we will never hear the end of it. Chapman will crow like a rooster that thinks he has laid an egg. We'll be down and out for good and all. Of course, I'll take it on myself and state that I spoke before consulting you; but they will yell all the louder about you being afraid to speak out, and you know that would be a lie."

The miller turned suddenly and went to his trough and tested the diminishing stream of meal; then he pulled a lever, and the machinery slowed up; the rush of water ceased, and dead quiet prevailed. To the younger man leaning against the door-frame in the sunshine he was a pathetic figure as he filled and emptied the big wooden scoop into the bag he was holding open. Suddenly the cloud on George's face lifted, and he went to the miller and touched him on the arm.

"After all," he said, "I need only tell what my honest convictions are, and I am not ashamed of them. In fact, maybe a man ought not to express views to a chosen few which he is unwilling to make public. I can't make a speech; but I'll do the best I can."

The miller's face was full, every line in it seemed under the action of strong emotion.

"Do you mean it, George—do you mean it, my boy? Do you, or are you just consenting to help me out of my fool muddle?"


"I mean it," George returned, simply. "I

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wouldn't have sent out a challenge to Olin of my own accord, but I will tell what I think in as direct a way as possible. I will do it as a matter of duty."

Tears of actual delight moistened the eyes of the miller. He laid a throbbing hand on George's arm. "You don't know—you can't begin to imagine—what a load you have taken off me. You know I'd rather have been publicly cowhided on my bare back than had them skunks laugh at me, as they would. I've always wanted folks to hear you. I believe it will do them good. They don't get to read about the great progress that is going on in such matters in the world outside of these hills and mountains, and it is high time their eyes were opened. I'll say a few things when I introduce you. I don't know what it will be, but I'll do the best I can to start you off."

## CHAPTER XVI

S George was slowly riding homeward, and was nearing the edge of the village, Myra, on her young bay horse, suddenly appeared before him as she rounded the shady bend of the road. She drew rein, nodded and smiled, and waited for him to reach her side. Her hands and lap were full of fern leaves and wild flowers.

"You are in better business than I am to-day," she jested. "You are providing something to eat, while these things are only to ornament my parlor mantelpiece. I shall put them in a new pair of vases which Olin brought me from Atlanta."

The smile with which he had greeted her died out. The allusion to the young minister, slight as it was, had a depressing effect on his spirits. Like a flash of light that seared his whole sensitive being came—for perhaps the first time—the realization that he had never been in the parlor of which she spoke. He had not, but his former playmate Olin had, and, look at it in as cheerful a light as possible, there were certain reasons why he would never see the room—never cross the threshold of her father's house in any formal or informal way. Myra seemed to have read his mind, for she frowned, tore some of

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the coarser leaves from her ferns, and, with a little gesture of regret, threw them down.

"Poor fellow!" she thought. "Poor boy!"

"I am glad I happened to meet you," he said, unsteadily. "There is something I wanted to say. I am afraid I have promised to do something that you will disapprove of very, very much."

She raised a bunch of ferns to her face, to which the warm color was rising. Her long-lashed eyes, as he saw them through the delicate green tracery, seemed to hold fathomless depths of mystery, to overflow with the nameless quality that had drawn him to her with a force which could have emanated from no other being.

"I know what you mean, George," she answered, with a smile meant to propitiate him for the unintentional wound just inflicted. "How could I help it, with my father and Mr. Strobe and Mr. Lee chuckling every minute over it?"

"Then you knew." He exhaled a deep breath, and continued to stare at her anxiously. "I want you to know that I didn't bring it about—I—"

"Oh, I knew you didn't, George!" Myra broke in. "It didn't take me a minute to see through the whole thing. I know my father, and I know Mr. Mell."

"But you—*you*," George insisted—"what are you going to think about it?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind." She avoided his anxious stare. "Believing as I do, you know, it seems wrong of any one to say a single word against my religion, and, George, you have a way of putting things that—I mean you carry people with you by an almost pitiful earnestness. You have

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no idea how impressively you talk. Your very soul seems to burn in your eyes and weep in your voice. I am afraid this is the beginning of a change. So far, you have interested only the few who have listened to you at those small meetings. You have already turned some from the old way to the new, and I am afraid your influence may spread."

"Do you want me to shirk that meeting?" George demanded, in a tone of despair. "I don't say I would or could now, but I'd like to know what the thing is costing me before I go into it. If I am to lose your good opinion—your friendship, I want to know it in advance. To do one's duty is right; to do it at the heaviest cost is even better, for then it is in the nature of a sacrifice. Tell me, Myra, which would you have me do—make that speech, or not?"

The flush on her face had deepened, her wonderful eyes shone as from irrepressible incipient tears.

"I am trying to be a true Christian," she faltered, looking into her ferns, "and to be that, it seems to me that I ought not to make any compromise with your strange views; and yet I am only human, after all, only a simple, natural girl, and I feel like standing up to you, George—*you*, not what you believe that is opposed to my faith, but you as a flesh-and-blood friend. You honestly think as you do—cruel circumstances, unhappiness, the—the sufferings of others, and your great sympathetic heart have led you that way. So, as a human being with a brain and a will to choose, you have a right to your own view. These people don't think so. They hold that it is unpardonable even to doubt the things they have been taught from infancy. But they are

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wrong, George—they are wrong. In fact, the Bible teaches that they are wrong about that, at least. How silly for them to say that you will be damned eternally for doubting the divinity of Christ now, nineteen hundred years after His death, when even Thomas, one of His intimate companions, refused to believe till he had absolute proof—a proof none of us can get now. I can't blame you for doubting. In fact, I believe that out of doubters the very best Christians are made. To tell the truth, I think I actually want you to make that speech. I can't bear the ridicule they are heaping on you, their shallow jokes about the weakness of your intellect, their coming victory, and your overwhelming defeat. There is one thing certain," Myra added, with a smile, "and that is that they don't dream of what a powder-can they are touching off. Many people are looking with favor on new ideas, and you give them in abundance. I have weighed your side of it very carefully, however, and I am sure there is one thing your religion takes from people which they ought to have, which all human beings need and which is necessary to their peace of mind."

"What is that?" George inquired.

"Why, it is the positive belief in a future life. I have asked Mr. Mell, and he says he merely *hopes* for it; your mother says practically the same thing—admits that she has no actual proof of any life after this. She says there ought to be, if there is any justice in the universe, but that is as far as she will go. George, here I am—simply me—Myra Chapman—and I am happy in my way, for I wish harm to no living soul and do the best I can to live right,



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but if you or your big, deep books were to take from me the simple faith I have in that particular thing—my absolute certainty of my salvation through Christ and His atonement—I'd be the most miserable girl alive."

Their horses had walked on slowly and were now drinking from a clear mountain-brook which in a shallow ford crossed the road. He was gazing at her in tense admiration, and for a moment he said nothing. It was her wistful, half-apologetic returning smile that caused him to break the silence which to him was full of a dumb delight he could not have explained.

"I wouldn't want you to be otherwise," he said, with emotion. "It seems to me that I'd want you always as you are, exactly as you are."

"Can you mean that, George?" she asked, in gentle surprise.

"Yes, I can't exactly explain it, but I do."

"You can say that—actually say that, and yet be willing to convert others to the theories which have made you yourself doubt the thing I hope for?"

He was watching her reflection as it lay on the rippling surface of the stream which ran along the mossy opposite bank, touched here and there by the branches of drooping willows.

"That is a pointed question," he replied, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, "and yet I can answer it to my own satisfaction. To begin with, I must remind you that you have not heard me say within the last year that I myself doubted that particular thing. I remember telling you that I did once, and I shall never forget the look of horror on your

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face. I was doubting then. I was like Mr. Mell is now, and my mother. He seems to be too full of the joy of life to care one way or the other, while my mother—my mother has suffered so much that she cannot believe in the possibility of happiness under any circumstances.”

“But you—*you!*” Myra cried, eagerly—“you say you have altered your opinion?”

“Decidedly,” George replied, raising his eyes to hers and holding her gaze. “It was an odd experience, Myra. I don’t suppose God ever made a man who worried more over that particular problem than I did. It was with me day and night. The more I read of the vastness and grandeur of the universe, the more hungry I was for proof that death would not forever shut me, as an individual entity, out from it—out from a fuller comprehension of the entrancing mystery. I became morbid in my doubts. There were desperate moments when I’d almost curse the whole black puzzle of life. Then one night I was converted.”

“Converted?” Myra ejaculated, and she leaned toward him on the pommel of her saddle, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Well, I might as well call it that,” he smiled, “for I had an experience that was every bit as emotional as the experiences of persons who shout and clap their hands during revivals. I was alone one night on the hill back of our house. Mother had gone to Funstown to transact some business with her lawyer, and stayed there all night. I had, as usual, been brooding on the subject of immortality. Try as I would, I could not shake it off or feel content. I

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was lying there on the heather with my eyes on the sky watching the stars and wondering over their magnitude and their endless journey through space. The lightning-bugs were flying about me, flashing their little search-lights here and there; the crickets were snarling in the cracks in the rocks; an owl was hooting, and from the marsh below a chorus was rising from the throats of thousands of frogs. Prayer-meeting was going on at the church below, and I heard Olin's voice as he prayed, and the singing which followed. Then it came upon me—my experience came. I can't describe it. But all at once I was in such an exalted state of mind that I stood up, spread out my hands, and declared that I did not care whether I was immortal or not—that to be in the hands of *such* a Maker, to serve whatever purpose *such* a Maker could have for me, was bliss enough."

"And then—and then?" Myra's voice broke under the tense sympathy bound up within her. "Oh, George, then—?"

"Then, strange to say, all at once I found that I believed in my immortality. In ceasing to search for it—in throwing away my purely selfish desire to gain it—it had come to me as free as the sunshine. I knew that I would live always, because the God as I had begun to know Him would not have opened such a door as that to me and ever intend to close it."

Myra had turned her head away. Their horses waded through the stream and entered the shaded road beyond. George saw her breast heave under the thin muslin that clothed it. She held her ferns to her face again in a hand that slightly quivered.

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Presently she turned to him, a serious light in her eyes.

"If you could hear yourself talk, George, you would not wonder at my being afraid of your upsetting the faith of persons who are happy in their own way of thinking."

"That is one thing I am not afraid of," he declared. "I don't believe that any one will ever give up the old form of belief till he is prepared for the new."

"Oh," Myra exclaimed, reproachfully, "you can say that, when you admit that Mr. Mell and your mother are in a constant state of doubt and perplexity?"

He smiled over the adroit snare she had set for him.

"They don't count," he answered. "Their views came to them not from anybody's argument—people are never changed that way—but from the inconsistencies about them, and the inadequacy of the old belief to their desires. Mell has an ideal which is constantly shocked, that is all. Then take my mother's case. How could she have faith in the religion of these people? It pretends to be founded on brotherly love, on the beauty of forgiveness, on the grandeur of self-sacrifice, but to her all that is sheer empty hypocrisy. Instead of appealing to her gentle qualities and wonderful womanhood, I am afraid it has fostered, first, the warfare of self-defense, and, secondly, a hatred that may never be conquered. She is too strong a character to confess to sins which were never hers; and these people are so exacting in their righteousness that they

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demand even more than the pound of flesh. They command her to kneel, not *with* them, but *before* them; they command her to bow, not to *God*, but to *them*. But you, Myra—you are different. You are of them, but not with them. Your sweet charity is broader; your character has often—oh, so often—kept her from finding fault with things you hold sacred. And now, to-day, in respect for you and yours, if you want me to stay away from this meeting I will do so.”

“No, no,” Myra said, with a start and a perplexed look in her eyes, “somehow I can’t ask that. I don’t know why, but I can’t. I am going to hear you, too. I am going to pray for you. I am going to hope that nothing but good, in some way or other, may come of it all.”

When Myra had reached her home and turned her horse over to a negro man-of-all-work about the farm, and was ascending the front steps, she met her mother, who eagerly advanced from the wide hallway to meet her.

“You certainly missed it by not being here,” the little woman announced as she stood stroking her smooth, black hair down over her brow, upon which not a wrinkle of age had yet appeared.

“Why, what has happened?” Myra asked, as she deposited her ferns on the sill of an open window and stood studying the animated face.

“What hasn’t happened?” The blue eyes of the elder woman twinkled with mirth. “Why, it begun just after you left. I don’t think you’d got out of sight on the slope of the road. Your pa and I were seated here on the veranda when both the

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Fox sisters come running in with a big bundle wrapped in a paper. They were so tickled that they couldn't talk plain. They unrolled it on the steps and showed us a great, new family Bible with heavy gilt clasps and gold letters sunk deep in the leather covers. It was a present from Olin. It seems that their sight is so bad that they can't read the fine print in the little Bible they have. You know, Olin has been going to see them often out of pity for their condition. He saw them trying to read, and the difficulty they had, and sent off to Atlanta for the book."

"It was good of him, wasn't it?" Myra asked, a reminiscent look in her dreamy eyes. "Just like him."

"Yes, just like him," Mrs. Chapman said; "that's what your father told them, and he raked Olin over the coals so roughly that he had the two old women fairly blubbering their eyes out. He told them it is such trifling folks as they are who are holding Olin down and keeping him from paying out of debt and making a start in the world. He told them that they had no need of a costly Bible like that, and that nobody but a silly spendthrift would have bought it. I tried to stop him, but he was mad and wouldn't listen to me. The old women wrapped up the book and went away sniffing—awfully taken down, and he sat there and raged on. The Fox sisters must have met Olin and told him about it, for he come twenty minutes later. He was pale and excited, and I was sorry for him; but your pa wasn't. He upbraided him as if he owned him body and soul. Folks had told him how Olin's

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money fairly leaked out of his pockets every time a hand was stretched out to him, and your pa told him every vagabond in the country had him spotted as a 'soft snap.' He told Olin, he did, that the last time Pete Triplett went to Funstown and got drunk and was put in jail, that it was Olin's money that bought the first dram. Oh, he told him a lot—a lot! Looks like somebody had kept an account of every act of charity the boy ever did, and had taken it to your father. I was sorry for Olin. I never was so sorry for anybody in my life. He was first red and then white, and didn't know whether to look up or down. Myra, he naturally would feel bad on your account. Once, when your pa was out of breath and stopped, Olin turned to me and whispered, looking toward your room window: 'Is she at home?' And when I said 'no,' and told him where you were, he whispered, 'I'm glad; Mrs. Chapman, I'd hate to have her hear it—I reckon I am a fool.'"

"It is a shame—a shame!" Myra cried, indignantly. "He does such things because he can't help it. He is a Christian, I tell you, and father isn't. He doesn't know what the word means. He is—he is a—"

"Don't say anything you will be sorry for—at least, don't say it where he'll hear it," Mrs. Chapman counseled quite unctuously, and she folded her slender hands over her gingham apron and smiled impulsively. "But that isn't all. The thing had quieted down some, and your pa looked like he was sorter ashamed of his tirade, when Olin happened to say that he was just a little bit sorry that your

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pa had arranged the speaking between him and George Dawson Tuesday night. Olin said he thought Christianity spoke for itself, and that it was belittling such a sacred thing to fetch it up in open debate with folks who denied its truth and benefit to mankind. Well, I must say I think he is right, but your pa wasn't in the humor for any criticism of his acts, and he spurted out again at such a rate in regard to Olin's duty to him for what he had done that Olin gave in completely and went away promising to do the best he could at the debate."

"Poor boy!" Myra said. "Father ought to be ashamed of himself. He would take every bit of individuality out of Olin if he had his way. He thinks because he and those men furnished the money for Olin's education that they own him body and soul."

"Speaking of Brother Lee and Brother Strobe," Mrs. Chapman said, with an impulsive laugh, "Olin was hardly out of sight before they came across the pasture, climbed the fence at the beehives, and come and took seats and begun to laugh and joke about the fun in store for them all Tuesday night. They had written down a lot of Bible questions they were going to put to George before the crowd. They read them off to your pa one by one and decided on what the answers would be and what a fool George would make of himself trying to reply. Then what do you think? Your pa up and made *them* hopping mad."

"Made them mad?" Myra echoed, half amused. "What did he say?"

"Why, he stopped them right in the middle of



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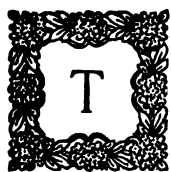
what they called their chief 'knock-out proposition' and told them, he did, that if they thought he would spend as much money as he had in giving an up-to-date preacher the highest theological education to kill the influence of a man that was reading books by the cart-load and attracting followers from the brain and sinew of the land—if they thought he was going to let greenhorns who didn't know the a b c's of the game butt in at such an important time they were as big fools as they looked, and that was saying a lot. I had to laugh. Seemed like your pa was mad at himself for cutting up like he had with Olin and wanted to take it out on somebody that would stand it. You never saw the like! Strobe got up and paced the floor, and slapped his thighs with his hat, and almost threatened to fight your pa bare-handed on the spot, and Lee looked like he wanted to do something, but hardly knew how to start. He said he'd always understood that Christianity was so simple that even a child could comprehend it, but your pa snapped him up and told him that it used to be so, but wasn't any more, and was likely to get more and more involved and tangled as time passed. He had foreseen the present situation, he declared, and that was why he had educated the right sort of a man. He said it took lawyers to understand the twists and turns of law, doctors to understand the human body, and theologians to understand theology and protect it against the ravages of time and changing customs. He talked so hard and strong and used such big words that the other two cooled down and let him have his way."

"Is it any wonder," Myra asked, with a pensive

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smile, as she turned into the hall, "that George and his mother and Mr. Mell want something more in the way of religion when such things as that are taking place before them? If my religion did not mean more to me than father's does to him I'd give it up."

## CHAPTER XVII



THE school-house stood on a slight knoll in the center of the village. It was a long building that had windows with green lattice blinds on the sides and a single door in the end which faced the street. It was surrounded by stark pines, the scant foliage of which furnished little shade in hot weather and too little shelter from the bleak winds of winter. The ground had once been a field under cultivation, and, save for the chert walk to the street, was given over to any vine, plant, shrub, or sapling which could take root in the rocky soil. The house was heated by two stoves for the consumption of wood which stood in frames of planks filled with clay, and whose rusty pipes, supported by wires from the ceiling and threatening to collapse at every joint, belched their blue smoke through broken panes in the window-sashes above the teacher's platform in the end. Near the front door stood a post from which protruded an iron crane, and from the crane hung an iron basket filled with the richest of pine knots. This evening the pine knots were blazing, and afforded sufficient light for the farmers to hitch their horses to the racks and scrubby trees about the grounds, and for ladies and children to find their way up the walk.

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A considerable crowd had gathered as early as seven o'clock, and a spirit of general levity possessed it. There were catcalls, shrill whistling, stamping of feet, rapping on the backs of benches, and good-natured jests at the expense of any individual who showed by his self-conscious looks that he dreaded the ordeal of entering and finding a seat under their scrutiny.

Chapman was an exception. He was not applauded as he led his wife and daughter in and gave them seats near the platform and with an easy stride ascended the steps of the platform itself and began to place the half-dozen chairs which he found in a heap in a corner in a row behind the table at which the speakers were to stand. This done, he cast glances at the lamps in the mirrored wall brackets and sat down. He waited a few minutes, then he rose, leaned over the table, and rapped soundly on it with his heavy pocket-knife.

"I want you all to be quiet, if you can, a minute," he said, firmly. "Nobody that I know of has been selected to take charge of this meeting to-night, and I reckon the duty devolves on me. Has Brother Lee and Brother Strobe got here yet?"

"Here! Here!" two expectant and tremulous voices answered from seats near the wall, and the men inquired for stood up.

"Well, I reckon you'd better come set up here," Chapman said, with a smile of condescension. "As many know, you both helped me pay for the big gun that is to belch in the defense of public decency to-night, and it is nothing but fair that you be asked to take a hand."

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Chapman waited for the two men to scramble over feet and legs to the aisle and thence advance to seats behind him. By a firm and jealous rapping on the table he killed a jocular wave of applause which was rising.

"This thing's got to be a fair deal in every sort of way." He swept the crowd with his slow glance. "When it is over I don't want it said that either side had the advantage. So I want to know if Tom Mell has got here yet?"

"He's run off, Brother Chapman!" The jest was from a tall mountaineer who, without a coat, and fanning his perspiring face with his straw hat, stood near the door. "Tom got to studying about it and lit clean out."

This remark was greeted by an uproar that was deafening. Chapman's pleased smile added to its impetus for a moment, and then he swept it out of existence with a dictatorial gesture of the hand.

"Not quite as good luck as that, Brother Ford," he said. "We'll hear from Tom as long as the devil is at large to give him orders."

"Oh, I'm here all right!" the miller called out, from a seat near the wall on the right. "Do you need me up there in your sanctified bunch? I don't want to rub against the wings you fellows are wearing."

"There's a chair for you here," Chapman replied. "Somebody said you'd introduce your man if I would mine, and we can both do it better where we can be seen by all. The Lord knows my speaker don't need no introduction. He's already known so well that we'll have to double the size of our church or rent a tabernacle tent."

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"I'm not introducing mine yet," Mell answered, and there was a comprehending laugh from some of his and George's sympathizers as the miller, looking rather warm in his heavy best coat of broad-cloth, stumbled up to the proffered chair.

The next arrival of note was the minister himself. With his mother on his arm, he entered amid loud applause, and together they walked up the aisle, where he gave her a seat near Myra and her mother. A look of almost pained embarrassment was on Olin's face as he bowed right and left in acknowledging the greeting, and then advanced toward the conspicuous hand his portly benefactor was extending toward him. As he seated himself on the platform near her father's chair, Myra caught his steady glance and smiled encouragingly. No one could read him so well as she, and to-night she had a keen sense of his aversion to what was taking place. She could fairly see the shrinking of his sensitive soul under her father's obtuse patronage. A shadow haunted his frank eyes, as if he despaired of ever lifting his associates to his plane of reverence for what he stood for. Myra watched his face until a slight commotion at the door attracted her attention. Then she saw that George Dawson had arrived. Dead quiet held the room as he came in. He was accompanied by his mother. She wore a plain black cotton dress and a sunbonnet of the same material, the hood of which hid her face. She sat down on the bench nearest the door as quickly as possible, as if she wished to avoid being seen, and with tentative step and glance George advanced up the aisle.

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There was no repetition of the coarse clamor which had greeted some others before him. Differ from him as the most of them did, he had their profound respect for his manner of life, and there was something in his calm and fearless bearing now which was indescribably in his favor. They had heard of the vast number of books he had read on abstruse subjects. In conversation with him certain words and forms of expression that they had never heard crept into his speech. It was reported that his mother's lawyer in Funstown, who had been a judge, had lent him a number of law-books which George had read so comprehendingly that the lawyer, after examining him, had declared before such witnesses as Tobe Sebastian that George already knew enough law to gain admittance to the bar of the State.

Seeing George when he was half-way up the aisle, Mell rose from his chair and signaled to him with his hand, and cried out, jovially:

"Come right up, my boy! I tell you I need company; the righteousness of this bunch has given me a chill. It would take old Nick's chimney-corner to thaw me out."

This characteristic remark evoked laughter even from the opposition, who had never been proof against the caustic wit of the miller; but George neither smiled nor noticed the mood of the audience as he made his way to the platform and sat down. Myra was watching him, almost holding her breath in a suspense of which she was not conscious. She saw his glance roving over the rows of spectators on the benches before him. Shadows fell here and there in the ill-lighted room, rendering many faces

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indistinct, and something told her that he was looking for her. She was sure of it when their glances finally met, for his eyes flashed and the telltale color rose to his face. She might have wondered, had she reflected, over her lack of consistency in so doing, but she smiled, and she meant her smile to convey encouragement and sympathy of a certain sort. It was a womanly act, for she felt more keenly than he, perhaps, the fact of his loneliness and isolation. He was an alien, she told herself, and a most courageous and sincere one among antagonistic people. He gave her a smile in return for hers—a smile that seemed vaguely to plead for pardon for the step he was taking. Myra's reflections were suddenly disturbed, for her father had risen and was soundly rapping for order.

"I want to say," he began, "that I am partly responsible for this meeting to-night. The idea come to me awhile back, and I talked it up. I am not going to make a speech myself. I'd like to, but I ain't going to, for I've got a man here that can talk for me and put the case in a clearer light, maybe, than I can. Now, here is the history of this whole business. A few years ago an ugly weed took root in our midst and begun to grow. I won't call no names—"

"Well, mine ain't a very *long* one." Mell laughed, and the crowd joined in the laugh and applauded out of sheer good nature.

"Well, since you confess your part in it, I won't have to point you out," Chapman smiled, as he looked down at Lee and Strobe and received their amused nods of approval. "I was going on to say



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that the weed begun to grow, and, as such pests will do in favorable air and soil, it spread. It spread and got bolder and ranker, till it become a threat against our body politic as a whole. Not only was our social fabric under its blighting scourge, but, gentlemen and ladies, that thing begun to twine its slimy tendrils about our very chances for eternal salvation. I don't know that you catch my idea, but I hope you do to the extent of your capacity, anyway. I ain't much of a speaker, but I've been told that I *would* have been if I had made a study of it in my young days. Why, once at the close of a term of the school my daddy sent me to, over at Dogwood, I was picked out by a vote of the faculty to deliver—" Here Chapman caught the glance of his wife and paused for a moment. "I won't tell that," he said, his rather rebellious eyes on his wife's face, "Tilly is shaking her finger at me. She says I never make a talk without bragging. What I was about to say wouldn't be bragging, though, for it is true, as many people alive to-day who heard that speech will testify. It was a grand occasion. The house was packed and jammed to the doors, and the fellows that had said their pieces before me hadn't even raised a ripple. In fact, folks was talking all over the house, but, young as I was—a mere strip of a lad—when I stepped out and made my bow and begun—"

The speaker was staring inquiringly into the upturned face of his wife. "Say!" he called out, irritably, "are *you* making this talk, or am *I* doing it?"

Mrs. Chapman made no reply, but Strobe reached

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out and caught his coat-sleeve. "You are getting off the track a little, Brother Chapman," he said, in a tone that was audible to many. "You know you promised not to take up at the outside more than five minutes."

"I believe I did. I believe I did," the self-elected chairman admitted. "Well, I'll throw all that out and go on. I found, to go back a step or two, that the awful state of affairs here at Shelby was getting worse and worse. Young men was bold enough to say things against our belief that would have sent them to the stake in early times. I sized up the trouble, and I said to these two men here"—he vouchsafed a glance at Lee and Strobe, who modestly lowered their heads—"that we would have to get together and do something that would count. As they will recall, I told them that what we needed was more skilled knowledge of the many twists and tangles of theology. The little, puny preachers we had didn't know the a b c's of the science nor head nor tail of the Scriptures because they hadn't had the right schooling under up-to-date teachers of the great and undying truth. I had my eye on a chap that I knew would fill the bill if he had the chance. Well, you all know the rest. You know now what a few dollars of ready money will do when the Lord has blessed it and the right man has charge of the expenditure. The young fellow went off, outstripped his whole class, and came back loaded down with prizes and certificates. He is here to-night, and—Yes, yes"—Chapman had caught his wife's signal and ended, impatiently—"yes, I'm going to stop, if for nothing else than to keep you from jerking

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your head off. Ladies and gentlemen, I have the high honor—I wasn't going to say much more, anyway—the high honor to present to your consideration this evening the Rev. Olin Dwight. Olin, please rise and step forward!"

There was great 'applause when Chapman seated himself and the young minister took his place at the stand. Myra's heart went out to her friend as he stood for a moment more embarrassed than she had ever seen him before. Knowing him as she did, she fully understood his objections to the proceedings into which he had been forced. What would he say?—how would he say it?—she was anxiously asking herself, when, to her surprise, he simply spread out his hands, bowed his head, closed his eyes, and began to pray aloud. In the gentlest, most appealing tones he invoked the blessings of God upon what was to take place, and humbly prayed that what was to be said on either side would not provoke animosity or angry discussion, and that nothing but good might result from the meeting.

"Nothing good won't come of it," Chapman was heard to say as he leaned toward Mell, "unless he wipes up the earth with you and your bull-headed gang. That abuse has got to come to a halt. We've sent off too much money to heathens to have 'em start up in our midst."

George Dawson heard this quip, but he did not join in Mell's smile of genuine appreciation of its aptness as an illustration of Chapman's point of view. On the contrary, he frowned and gently shook his head and drew the miller's attention to the fact that Olin was beginning to speak.

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The minister was thoroughly at ease. He simply preached a sermon, and one of his best. He seemed inspired as he leaned over the stand, locked his slender hands, and, without scriptural text or reference to his opponent, he told of the vast value of the Christian faith to humanity the world over. Illustration after illustration came in rapid fire from his impassioned lips. He told of death-bed scenes he himself had witnessed where the converted had passed away with smiles of joy that remained on the marble faces as if done by the brush of the Infinite Artist. He told of the despair and the death agony of unbelievers. They had tasted of the poison of doubt, and no power on earth below nor in heaven above seemed able to help them. They went out into the black void, groping—seeing nothing, touching nothing—screaming to ears that they themselves had closed. They had broken a divine law and were receiving just punishment for their disobedience. It was not his intention, he declared, to defend Christ. Such a course, as he understood it, would be an insult to the Saviour of mankind. A man did not go about trying to justify his belief in his mother's love and self-sacrifice. It was a thing so obvious to him that he could scarcely believe a doubt of it could lodge in another brain. And it was that way with the whole-souled believer in Christ and His atonement. The Master, Himself, had not violently fought the unbelief around Him, and it was the duty of Christians now to follow His example and treat those gently and kindly who failed to see the great and living truth.

"I am afraid you switched just a little off the

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track in that last remark," Chapman said, as Olin sat down by him. "When Christ kicked over the tables of the money-changers and driv' them money-sharks like scared sheep from the temple He had fire in His eye and showed there was a limit to patience and stupidity. You needn't tell me if He was here to-night and knew the exact lay of the land as I do that He'd handle these chaps with gloves. Huh, as I understand Him, He was imbued both with the man-spirit and the God-spirit. But you done purty well—don't you let that bother you"—he glanced at Lee and Strobe, who were rubbing their hands and beaming in sheer ebullition of pride; "I think, on the whole, that in not even mentioning a name of one of 'em, or quoting any argument of theirs, you hit 'em harder than if you'd honored 'em by extensive notice. I never thought of that, but it was a good plan. Look at Mell. By gum, he looks like a whipped dog with its tail between its legs. You've throwed him clean off his props. He come here loaded with high-sounding stuff to fire back at us and he don't know how he's going to ring it in. Lord, Lord, Olin, you'd make a slick politician—wouldn't he, boys?"

Chapman would have said more, but the miller was rising. Unusual gravity had fastened itself on his habitually jovial face. Those near him could see that the baggy knees of his trousers were quivering. A jest from any source at that moment would have furnished relief and put him into his proper element, but nothing of the kind came. The audience had been profoundly moved by the talk of their favorite, and the hearts of many still glowed under the glorious

## Jane Dawson

assurance of their eternal safety from evil in which they believed only too well.

"I am not here to make a speech," Mell began, clearing his throat and forcing a smile. "I'm not like my brother in iniquity who introduced his man with a talk so long that his good wife had to remind him where he was at. The truth is, I am not half as good a talker as he *thinks* he is, and I'm not going to match my tongue against his. My brother in iniquity—I call him that because he claims we are all born in sin and can't get out—my brother has had more practice than I have. As most of you know, he is great at praying in public. He closes or opens every sermon he hears with prayer. I met a man once coming away from meeting who had evidently heard him pray at his usual length. The feller looked like a gypsy or a tramp with a foreign cut to his jib, and, to my astonishment, he told me it was the first time he had ever been inside of a church. I thought that was powerful queer, and, just for fun, I asked him what he thought of the sermon. He said he hardly knew what to think about it, that he never knew before that the minister preached on his knees and stayed there till everybody in the house was asleep."

This recital evoked a genuine laugh, which seemed to be enjoyed by everybody except Chapman himself. Even Myra and her mother smiled, and Lee and Strobe were seen covering their mouths with their hands and eying their superior with cautious glances. Chapman half started to his feet, but changed his mind, and, red in the face with anger, he allowed the jester to continue.

## Jane Dawson

"As I say, I didn't come to speak." Mell's voice was now steady and confident, and he sent it well to the front. "But I do want some o' you folks to know a little bit more about George Dawson than you do. 'A prophet's not without honor,' the Good Book says, and George happens to be in that fix. Most of you turn up your noses at him because he don't believe just to a gnat's heel what you do, but I'd have you understand that the boy ain't thinking in a rut that was dug millions of years ago. Steam-cars are swishing through these aboriginal hills; telephone lines are being spun out like spider-webs from the chief centers to your doors; books and magazines are getting as common as pig-tracks, and for you folks to endeavor to hold back a progressive mind to an ox-cart gait in a swift age like this is foolishness of the first order.

"I want to tell you something. Last summer a big preacher come up here from Atlanta and stopped at the hotel at the Springs. He was a big gun in your own theological world. He had a D.D. tacked on the end of his name, and it didn't stand for doodle-digger, neither. He had published no end o' deep books, and is put down as a coming bishop. Now, while he was here, Brother Chapman heard of it and went to see him and asked him to preach for him and his crowd, but the big man told him that he was plumb fagged out in the soul-saving business, and was up here for a rest, and so you didn't get to hear the smartest preacher by all odds that ever drifted this way in search of health and a good time."

"I'm glad you admit *some* of 'em have sense," Chapman grunted. "He *is* a big man, and he ain't

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the only one in the world, either. They are as thick as flies in August."

Mell turned on him and nodded. "You just wait and I'll tell you why I think he is smart," he said, with a smile. "He didn't preach for you, but by some hook or crook he heard about the little gatherings me and George and a few other disreputable scamps had from time to time at my mill, and he looked us up. He not only looked us up, but he talked pretty free, considering his cloth. He told us—he told me and George that we was in the foremost ranks of religious reasoning of the present time, and that he was simply delighted to know that the seed of spiritual enlightenment was sowed and sprouting away up here among the mossbacks. He patted George on the head and told him God would bless him, and begged him never to turn aside from what he believed and talked. He said it was an awful fight that was being waged; but that the great dawn was breaking. He said that even in Atlanta among up-to-date city folks he had to be powerful careful just how much of the truth he put to his congregation. Some would stand for the straight-out new thought, and others insisted that it was the devil's invention and set as a trap to catch the unwary. He laughed and told us joke after joke about how nigh he'd come to giving them straight medicine, and how them that he called 'the old fogy,' dried-up ones would hang back after meeting and want to know what he meant by such and such a statement. It was funny. You'd have split your sides laughing. For instance, he said one old woman wanted to know, one day after church,



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how he could claim that real live devils didn't exist, when Christ made it His special business to drive a lot of full-sized ones out of some folks, and made 'em take refuge in a drove of hogs that plunged into the water and made away with themselves. The preacher was a funny cuss. He had a big, red face and a constant grin, and he said he hardly knew what *to* answer, for the woman was well off and paid her dues regular. He said he done his best to enlighten her in his usual roundabout way, but she held out for her devils. She wanted to know what it was that made the hogs plunge in the water if the devils wasn't in 'em, and he told her, he said, that the whole thing took place in a hot country where long, dry spells was common, and that no doubt the hogs was thirsty and got drowned because they couldn't swim. 'You know, sister,' he said, 'hogs ain't web-footed like ducks.' Now, I'm just telling you about this preacher—" Mell joined in the laugh that his story evoked, and went on: "I'm just telling you about him because it shows what sort of thinking is going on even in the leading pulpits of the land. This fellow draws the highest pay—"

"That's it!" Chapman thundered. "He *does* draw pay, and he is a traitor in the camp—a self-confessed one at that! He takes money from people who want God's law and truth and makes sport of 'em behind their backs. During the war we strung his sort up to the limb of a tree and called 'em spies. He ought to be kicked out."


"The fellow was powerful frank and honest on that line," the miller said, seriously, glancing first

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at Chapman and then back at the audience. "He said he had given no end of thought and prayer to it. He said folks, *as a whole*, simply wasn't ready to grasp the advanced idea. Them that kept abreast of the times—and they furnished a big part of the funds—wanted him to hold his job, and agreed with him that it wouldn't do any harm to pull the wool over the eyes of them that had to be treated like children and cried for their old toys."

Chapman, hot and flushed, was about to rise; but, seeing his intention, Mell waved him back into his seat and announced that his young friend, George Dawson, would speak now, and that it was too late to have any controversy over side issues.

## CHAPTER XVIII

F Olin Dwight had appeared calm and self - possessed, George Dawson appeared quite as much so. Myra, who was regarding him with considerable concern, marveled over his deliberate bearing as he took his place at the stand, rested his hand on its top, and glanced steadily over the audience.

"I hesitated about speaking to-night," he began. "I was not sure, at first, that it would be quite right, for there is nothing I could say, from my heart, at least, which would not be in the nature of a criticism of many things you hold sacred. I would have it understood at the outset that I wouldn't attempt to destroy your faith, but—"

"Huh!" Chapman interrupted in a gruff voice, "it would be mighty foolish of you to attempt to pull down a thing that has stood out against your sort for two thousand years."

"Now, you just let up!" Mell leaned across the knees of Lee and Strobe to say. "You've had your whack at this thing, and so have I, and so has your man. I know George well enough to know that the only way to get a good clean flow out of him is to let him plumb alone and not nag him. I've seen him shut up like a mud-turtle at a single interruption.

## Jane Dawson

The crowd's quiet and respectable, and you'll have to be, too."

There was a ripple of amusement over the room at the evident discomfiture of Chapman and his surly obedience to Mell's command, but it died out when George resumed.

"There is only one thing that drives me to say what I shall say," he declared in firm, clear tones, "and that is the belief that it is my duty. Many great philosophers agree that it is the duty of every man first to get convictions, and then to stand by them. I have some convictions which I don't think all of you have. In every age men have differed in their beliefs; in every age and at every place men have stepped out of the ranks of their fellow-men and stood for reforms which were unpopular with the majority. As a rule, such men have had to suffer for the stand they took under ostracism, disgrace, imprisonment, or death.

"The great conspicuous martyr to truth, as He saw it, was the founder of your religion. He came to life in times which I sometimes think were in many respects not unlike our own. He was born in a humble way, as many men still are born. Near Him and yet separated from Him by impassable social walls were those who were powerful, those who were rich, those who were honored and even worshiped. Nearer to Him was the class to which he belonged—the poor, the unfortunate, the neglected—the masses crushed and ground into the mire of misery by the splendid chariot-wheels of wealth, power, and blind selfishness. I stand here to-night to tell you what I believe to be the truth about Him. I believe it so

## Jane Dawson

firmly that I would be willing to assert it with my last breath. That Man, so great, so good, so full of love and sympathy that His words, His acts, have lived after all these years, and will ever live, was not a God, but a suffering, yearning human being looking to God as aspiring beings are looking to Him to-day. But He went further than any other man of His time or since His time. With a heart bleeding with sympathy, He searched for the prime cause of human unhappiness. Those of His time who were more learned in books and the teachings of wise men than He overlooked what He discovered. As a man imprisoned in darkness can see light more readily than a man out in the open, Jesus from His sordid, depressing surroundings saw, grasped, and held the—Remedy. It was plain to His divine sight—divine, because it was of God, as the best of us all is of God—that the uncouth monster of Selfishness was at the bottom of all the evils of mankind. It was plain to Him, too, that Love was the combined physical and spiritual force in the universe, because Love was God, and God was the universe. He believed that Love, properly directed, would conquer evil, and He proved it. He had followers who saw as He saw and gloried in the great truth to which He had opened their consciences. They did their best to establish a new order of things on the basis of that wonderful philosophy, but did they succeed? Did they? I want you to ask yourselves that question to-night. I want you for a moment to lay aside your belief in a supernatural Jesus—a Jesus who was the only-begotten Son of God—and, therefore, more capable of good than you—and answer this question:

## Jane Dawson

Have you treated Him, even as a mere man, right and fairly? He has begged you not to think of Him as a mystical being, but, for your own good, simply to *do* as He wished. He has asked you to love your neighbor as yourselves that you may know the great joy to be found in love, charity, and self-sacrifice. I shall answer for you. Christ was a Man who more earnestly desired social reform than Abraham Lincoln because more was at stake. What Lincoln wished was the improvement of social conditions peculiar to only *one* spot of the earth's surface; what Christ sought was to unshackle and uplift *the world*. I plead with you to try to look upon Jesus as I do, and ask yourselves in your hearts this question: If He were here now would He approve of your daily lives and religious methods? You must understand that you are not merely His followers in name, but His so-called, self-appointed *representatives*. Conditions about you now would show Him what your work in His vineyard has amounted to. You claim to be carrying out His instructions. I wonder if you are. I fancy seeing Him in the flesh at one of your rousing revivals, during which you appear to come nearer the throne of God than at any other time. Surely you'd rather have Him visit you then than at any other time. I hear your shouts of joy, your sobs of ecstasy. I see your beaming faces and falling tears. I see Him standing by and looking on. There is a look of actual bewilderment on His divine face. I hear Him ask in wonder why you are so happy when so many others are miserable. I hear your frank and honest answer: 'Because we are redeemed. By Thy blood shed in our behalf and

## Jane Dawson

by our faith in Thee we are redeemed from the wrath of God. Oh, blessed be our Saviour!

“‘Wrath of God’? I hear Him say in wonder. ‘My Father has no wrath. He is Love—all Love and only Love!’”

“Then I hear you say: ‘We worship Thee because Thou art the only-begotten Son of God who died for us, and I hear Him say in a voice clogged with tears of sorrow:

“‘You misunderstand. I did not die *for* you. I died while trying to *make you comprehend* the will of My Father who is in heaven.’

“Then I see His divine glance roving over your joyous body of worshipers looking for at least *one* comprehending follower, and I see Him turn away bowed to earth with a cross heavier than the one He bore up Calvary.

“I wonder what He would say of us here in these mountains where the claim of righteousness is loudest, where the law of creed is the most binding and severe? I fear the tongue which once gave hope and joy to the few who understood would be silent—tied to dumbness by regret and chagrin. I remember a scene that chilled my blood in childhood. It was night. There was no moon, and but little starlight. A young man had been accused of a foul crime. He was innocent, but circumstances pointed to his guilt, and he was told to flee, for a lawless mob was after him. He was pursued like a wild, four-footed beast in the forest. His mother, with the agony of death on her face, fell on her knees before his pursuers and pled for the life of her son. But with furious curses she was dashed

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to the earth, and the screaming horde of madmen passed on. The young man was overtaken, dragged to a tree, hanged, and riddled with bullets. The mob dispersed to learn, when the dawn broke, that another man had confessed to the crime and been executed. The members of the mob were members of the church. They attended service the next Sunday. They wore their best clothes; they had shaved their faces and brushed their hair; they smiled and nodded to one another, and spoke of the crops. They sang and prayed, and were not deeply troubled by the mistake that was made. It was one of the things which could not be avoided; they believed in the guilt of their victim, and under that belief they could not control a fury which was only natural to men born in sin. Their religion bore on the question scarcely at all. They failed to connect it at all with human love and sympathy. The earnest minister, learned in the maze of his particular form of theology, I remember, made no mention of the affair. There was another thing far more important to consider. A most horrible scandal had reached his ears. A man hitherto respected in the community, a member of the church, had been heard to say that he could not reconcile himself to a belief in a literal hell of fire and brimstone. The minister preached a powerful sermon showing the great injury such a belief would be to society at large. Not only was the fear of eternal punishment a check to the evil in the hearts of men, but to say there was no eternal punishment was a denial, in direct terms, of the blessed atonement of Christ, for if God did not mean to punish His



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creatures, then Jesus accomplished nothing by his sacrifice."

George paused for a moment and looked over the still faces upturned to his. Against the white-washed wall near the door he saw his mother. Her bonnet was pushed back on her head, her hands locked tightly in her lap. Her eyes, fixed steadily on him, held a queer, probing stare. He next saw, in a shadowy corner not far from his mother, Silas Dwight as he leaned forward, his eyes glaring in tense admiration and awe. His lower lip hung in suspense, his face was rigid and pale. George's glance swept on to Myra. There was a sweet, pained expression on her face, and she looked down as if to avoid meeting his eyes.

"I want you to understand why I have drawn those contrasting pictures," George continued. "I did it for a purpose. I want you to believe me when I say that that mob could have taken no part in that lynching if the men who composed it had understood Christ's life and teachings, as I and many others understand them. He put love and sympathy and forgiveness ahead of everything else, and had they understood His plea they could not have had fury in their hearts on that awful night—they could not possibly have resisted that mother's cry of agony, for they would have put themselves in her place as Jesus would have done.

"I could talk here all night about the bad social conditions we live under which I think would be better if our religion were of a higher type. I passed a group of happy children the other day. They were well dressed, and were of our well-to-do

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families. They were on their way to school. Shortly afterward I went to the Court-House, and there I read a notice posted on the wall that the agent for a great factory in Atlanta would be in town that day to engage hands to work in the mills. I waited till the appointed hour and saw men, women, and children gathering. They wore poor clothing and were dirty and ill fed. They themselves had no education, and they expected none for their young; all they hoped to get was food and clothing. Those of the parents who could write recorded the names of the children they had brought, and those who could not sign their names made cross-marks in deeding away their little slaves. In the square about us business was going on in the usual way. Men were unloading wagons at the stores. Other men were swapping horses, with the light of avarice in their eyes. A group on the veranda of the hotel were smoking and talking of the success of a great revival, where scores of persons had made a profession of faith, joined the church, and been baptized. I wondered—I wondered, as I stood there, if all creation was spiritually blind.”

At this point Mrs. Dwight rose in her seat. Those quite near her saw the white look of fury on her face, and heard her mutter: “Bastard!” as she turned into the aisle and haughtily strode to the door. George went no further, for Chapman, as if anxious for a chance to interrupt him, said:

“I reckon she didn’t like that last underhanded lick. Well, who can blame her? I think she did pretty well to stick it out as long as she did. It is late, anyway. The crowd looks sleepy—I know I am.”

## Jane Dawson

George had turned to Mell, and the audience, thinking that the speaking was over, rose. At this juncture Olin approached George and held out his hand.

"I'm sorry my mother left as she did," he said, in a tone of regret.

"Oh, that is all right," George answered. "I understand how she feels, and I am sorry if I offended her."

The young minister hastened away to join his mother, and George found himself alone with the miller.

"Of course, I didn't get a chance to say all I had planned," George said. "I gave those examples with the intention of showing how Christ's real teachings would reform such things among us, and—"

"Oh yes, yes," Mell answered, with a smile, "but you didn't hit 'em just like I hoped you would. You was really firing bird-shot against a stone wall. These folks don't care a dern how many fellows are lynched by mistake, nor how many children work in factories and stay out o' school. What I wanted to see you do was to pull their old hobgoblin' tales to pieces, and have some fun with 'em. When you try, you can play that game to a queen's taste. I don't know how to make you out; here lately you've had a lot o' serious things to say on the line of your talk to-night. I reckon Christ *did* have some such ideas, but He never could impress 'em on anybody else. Two thousand years has passed since then, and human nature hasn't altered a smidgen. People are looking out for themselves, and I reckon if they

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didn't the whole dang thing would go to pieces. It works that way all the way down the line of life. We devour our kind, wild beasts do their'n, and so do insects so fine you can't see 'em with the naked eye. It is one continual scramble of life for life. If Christ was just a real man of flesh and blood like you claim, I reckon He must have been a poet with a pretty dream in His head. I ain't with these people—don't think that; but I don't always agree with you exactly. You see, I reason some on my own hook. I don't like two things to clash. When my mill rocks get to wabbling I shut off the water; if I don't, hell will be to pay or somebody will eat grit. When you talk to me you must stick to logic. You say, with all the rest, that God is all powerful, and in the next breath that a mere human being can pick flaws in the world He created. Don't it look to you like— Come on, I see your mammy waiting at the door, and I've got to blow out the lights. Don't it look to you like if the Lord had really meant the teachings of Christ to become the law of the land that he would have created a *few folks* that would obey it?"

George made no answer. They had joined his mother, who stood alone in the doorway, and he took her arm and led her away. She was silent during the entire walk homeward, and he wondered what her mood might indicate. Reaching home, she went into the house, leaving him seated in a chair in the yard at the door. He saw the light of her candle as it flashed across the grass as she passed and repassed the window of her bedroom. He experienced an odd conviction that she was trying to avoid conversa-

## Jane Dawson

tion with him. Presently she came out and sat down in a chair, near him. There was silence for a moment, and then he said:

"I am afraid you didn't exactly like my talk to-night. I was watching you all the time, and I read disappointment in your face. You seemed not only disappointed, but rather surprised."

She made no reply. He saw her start as if about to speak, and then lapse into silence again.

"Mother," he demanded, "what was wrong with what I said?"

"I didn't say *anything* was wrong with it," she gulped, and he saw her clenched hand rest on her knee. "I didn't know you believed all that, that's all. I expected to get comfort out of the meeting somehow, some way, but—"

"But you didn't?" he threw in, gloomily. "Can you tell me why?"

She looked straight at him now with an expression in her wan face that had never lain on it before. He saw her thin chest rise and fall. "I don't believe what you said," she answered, grimly. "You would have me believe that it is our duty to love *every human being*. I don't believe it. Hate is the only joy God ever gave me, and I won't have it taken from me. I didn't go there to hear all that stuff. What do I care whether a gang of brats have to work? They've got names of their own. They can grow up and be respected and not be taunted by the public. They can love and marry and be happy. What do I care whether some woman's son is lynched or not—haven't I been through worse? and is there any end in sight? I wanted to see that stuck-up Sally

## Jane Dawson

Dwight pulled off of her high seat. I wanted to see them folks rise up on the benches and wave their hands and yell when you spoke. As it was, most of them agreed with Olin, and powerful few knew what you were talking about. Old Dick Noble, nigh me, was asleep, and some boys was laughing at him and pinning papers to his coat. What Olin said pleased them. Then Sally Dwight got up, with a sneer on her nose, and stalked out of the house and broke up the meeting on purpose. As God is my Judge, I rose to meet her when she passed me. I started to grab her by the throat and choke her. I don't know what stopped me. I came in the breadth of a hair of doing it."

"Oh, mother, mother, mother—"

"That will do!" The words with which she interrupted him came out as if driven to the surface by a volcano of agony. "Don't scold me now. I'll be all right in the morning. It seems queer, though, to find you so—so different from me. Why, George, you are a—Christian—you are the only one that's lived since Christ was crucified. I never understood what He meant, and I can't understand you. I don't believe there is any life after this. When we die we are put in the ground, and we rot—that is all; we rot."

He lowered his head to his hands as she turned into the house. He sat there till his hair and clothing were damp with dew. Over the meadows and rolling hills the mystic moonlight was spread like an impalpable veil. He thought of Myra's evident disapproval of his speech, her set features, her downcast eyes, the little curves of pained forbearance

## Jane Dawson

about her lips. He saw her waiting at the door for Olin—Olin who had pleased her—who had always pleased her. There was a sharp pain in his breast. He groaned, rose stiffly, and turned into the silent house.

## CHAPTER XIX



ONE afternoon shortly after this, George was on the mountain-side which overlooked the village several miles away. His mother owned a tract of woodland there, and he was occupied in selecting such trees as were suitable for sale to a sawmill. When he found a tree, he blazed it with his axe and turned to look for another. The afternoon was well advanced. The sun was obscured by dense clouds which extended for miles along the western horizon. The day had been hot and sultry, but now there was a touch of crisp coolness in the quickening breeze from the vast valley. The monster trees about him, which seemed none too well rooted in the sloping, rocky soil, began to sway, quiver, and creak as their locked boughs slid to and fro in a close embrace. The clouds were now as black as the smoke of coal, and in tumbling billows had overspread the sky. Experience told him that one of the frightful wind-storms which frequently came to that locality was about to break, and yet he had no thought of personal danger. Seating himself on a projecting boulder, he bared his head to the breeze and with entranced eyes gazed on the scene. The darkling pall above him sank lower and wrapped him in its folds. The extent of his view was now limited; he



## Jane Dawson

could no longer see the houses in the village. Above and beneath him the black void was cut with zig-zag flashes, and deafening crashes followed. There was a blaze in the top of a tall pine quite close to him, and the majestic trunk was split to its heart, stripped of its bark, and stood toppling in the wind, a pale, splintered ghost of its former self. Still the beholder feared nothing; on the contrary, he drank in the scene with a delight he could not have analyzed. The wind in the valley had now reached the force and speed of a tornado, and was creeping upward. There was a dull roar from the distance like the prolonged salvo of an army. The tree-tops beneath him swayed like the billows of a mad ocean; flying leaves, bits of bark, sand, and gravel stung his cheeks. But still his soul exulted.

Presently, happening to turn his attention to the main-traveled road on the mountain-side above him, he saw something which drew him to his feet in alarm. It was a woman on the back of a frightened horse. The animal was madly plunging down the road, and he could see from the perilous manner in which the rider rocked and bounded in her saddle that she was in imminent danger of falling. In a lull in the roar of the elements he heard her despairing cry.

He thought quickly. The horsewoman was now out of sight behind the intervening trees and boulders; but, as the road wound in and out in its gradual descent to the valley, it occurred to him that he would have a chance to aid the rider by taking a direct cut through the trees and undergrowth to a near-by point which the horse would

## Jane Dawson

have to pass. Through the tangle of vines and thorn bushes, his feet slipping on the heather and rolling stones, he plunged with nothing to guide him but his sense of direction. Again he heard the rider's cry, and a familiar quality in it chilled his blood. Could it be Myra? Yes, for he now remembered that she had that morning gone to spend the day with an aunt on the other side of the mountain, and would be returning about this time. On he plunged, his breath coming quick and labored. In a moment he would reach the road. He could hear the clatter of the iron-shod beast on the rocky ground as the animal rounded the declivitous bend. It was Myra. She was still in the saddle, her face white as death, her hands clinging to the reins. He sprang into the road and faced the plunging, snorting horse. Raising his hands, he stood directly in the animal's way. Seeing him, the brute reared up on its hind feet and threw Myra to the ground. George's heart sank in dismay, for she was directly under the pounding hoofs. The next instant, however, the horse plunged over her body, which lay in a motionless heap, and broke off through the trees and bushes down the mountain-side.

George ran to the girl and raised her up. She opened her eyes, and a grateful light of recognition flashed in them, and then she swooned. The storm now burst in the height of its fury upon them. Taking her in his arms as if she had been a child, George bent to the wind and grimly fought his way forward. He remembered a place of shelter near by, and wondered, encumbered as he was, if he could possibly reach it. Her head rested on his shoulder;

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her face was upturned, her lips parted. To shield his eyes from the pelting sand and gravel he bent so low that his cheek lay against hers. The soft touch was like fire to powder. His heart bounded; his soul seemed to flame; his blood coursed wildly in his veins. He drew her against his breast and fondled her limp form even as he staggered onward. He told himself that his moment had come. It could only be for a moment, for it would end when she opened her eyes; but now she was his. Alone together, there amid the vast upheaval of the elements, she was his. He pressed his lips to her cheeks, to her lips—he muttered low, crooning words of despair in her ears. And yet he was alive to the thought of saving her.

Against the whirling clouds he espied the towering pine which marked the little cave in the rocks which he was trying to reach. To do so he had to leave the road and strike out through a sheer labyrinth of trees, bushes, vines, jagged boulders, and treacherous chasms. At moments he stood almost thwarted in his attempt by blasts which all but drove him to his knees. The twisting, swaying top of his landmark was ever before his eyes. Finally there was only a little stony gorge to cross and they would be in safety. It was accomplished; before him rose the cliff in the side of which was the retreat he was seeking. It was darker inside the little, low chamber, which was no larger than a very small cabin, and, seeing no place to lay his burden, he sank to a seat on a flat stone, with Myra still unconscious in his arms. He was so exhausted that he could not speak, but he gently shook her. With benumbed

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and quivering fingers he attempted to raise the lids of her eyes; but this he could not do. Was she dead? he asked himself; had sinister Fate at last given her to him like that? His heart seemed to swell and burst within him. As her head lay on his arm, he ran his hand through her warm hair; he stroked her brow—her cheeks—he whispered words of endearment that bled with agony—he kissed her lips. A dense cloud, borne earthward by the blast, cut out the remaining light. It was totally dark. He kissed her again and again. He prayed, not to Heaven, but to her, to respond to his caresses. Was he mistaken, or was there growing warmth to her lips? He was sure now, for they puckered under his in a faint kiss. Then she moved slightly, exhaled a breath against his cheek, and put her arm about his neck, and drew his head down and kissed him. Then she lay still. He felt her heart beating against his side; the warmth of her body met his own. The cloud passed. The gray light crept into the low doorway and over her faintly flushed face. They looked into each other's eyes. Her color rose.

"Oh, George, you must put me down!" she cried, and yet she did not move.

"Not yet, not yet," he panted. "I am afraid you are hurt."

"I don't think I am," she said, slowly. "I think I only fainted from the shock of my fall. Oh, it was awful—awful!" She put her feet down and rose and stretched her body and arms. "No, I'm not hurt," she declared; "but I would have been killed if you hadn't come when you did. George, George, you saved my life!"

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He found himself unable to formulate a reply. His old diffidence in her presence was augmented by the thought of his recent boldness. She seemed to comprehend this, and a gentle wave of sympathy passed through her. She sat down on the stone, put out her hand to his, and drew him down beside her. They were silent for a moment, then she said:

"George, you kissed me just now, and I—I really did not realize where I was, and I think—in fact, I know I kissed you. I was almost unconscious. George, it wasn't fair to me. I have never kissed a man before, and—and, oh, why did you let me?"

"I wasn't thinking," he said, in desperation. "I wasn't myself. I thought I'd never hear you speak again. I was crazed by despair, for you are my life, my soul. I wouldn't have dared touch you at any other time, for I know full well that you are not for me. You must forgive me if you can." He lowered his head to his hands and sat mute and still.

She leaned toward him and looked at him with eyes which seemed to melt. There was a tremor in her voice when she spoke:

"You've never told me before that you loved me. Why—why didn't you?"

He uncovered his face; he locked his hands before him; his lips had grown white, and they shook visibly; he looked at the ground rather than at her.

"What would have been the use? I knew you knew it. I think everybody must know it. For

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years you have been in my thoughts day and night. I watch for you every time I go out at the door of my home. When I am at work in the field I am never content unless I am in view of your house. Here on the mountain to-day I kept looking at the road over which you rode this morning. You may not think so, Myra"—he had twisted his hands together again, and still refused to meet her eyes—"but it is a fact that a man—when the world is dead against him, at least—may worship a woman whom he knows he'll never possess—worship a woman he knows Fate is going to give to another man. He will worship her and stand in awe of the man to whom she is going, as he would stand in awe of God Himself."

He had covered his face again. She felt the quiver of emotion that shook him from head to foot. She sat silent for a moment, and then she took one of his hands, held it to her lips, and kissed it.

"I ought not to have reproached you for kissing me," she said. "You had the right to. You saved my life, and, if you love me like that, I am to blame for leading you on. I have known it for years. I have tried to avoid you, but simply couldn't. I may as well be frank. I am a weak woman. I—I want your love. I am afraid it isn't right, but, oh, George, I want it—I want it!"

He stared at her incredulously, his lips parted in groping wonder.

"You say you want it?"

She nodded slowly, her frank eyes fixed earnestly on his face. "Yes, and of late more than ever—I mean since Olin came back. The other night,

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George, when you were speaking at the school-house my last hope died of—of ever seeing you a happy man. Oh, you were so brave, so honest, and yet so pitiful! I cried as you stood there alone against all those odds. I knew you were wrong, wrong, wrong, and yet my heart bled for you. It seemed to me that you were cutting the last bond between—between us.”

“You mean—?”

“I mean— George, Olin loves me.” Her eyes were downcast now. “He not only loves me, but he is counting on making me his wife. I have had an awful, awful struggle, for I want to do my full duty, and it seems to me that, as a Christian girl, if I were to desert him and cause him to falter in his work through the despondency that would be sure to come—it seems to me if I did that I’d be committing a sin that never would be pardoned. I couldn’t—couldn’t live with you, and love you, and believe in you as a wife should, and still cling to a faith so different from your own.”

“Then you have promised him—?” George began, but she took him up.

“No, not yet. He urged me last night as we walked home together; but I didn’t promise him. Somehow I couldn’t. Something deep down within me seemed pleading with me to postpone it. At times I think I could care for him, and at others I don’t. George, if I had been in his arms just now as—as I was in yours, I don’t think I would have kissed him. I don’t think I would have *wanted* to. I said I was unconscious, but I seemed to know that your lips were on mine. I didn’t know if it

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was a dream or not, but I wanted to lie there always."

Her voice died in a welling sob. She stood up and moved toward the entrance, as if to look out, then she turned back and bent over him. She touched one of his knees with the tips of her fingers.

"I have said more than I ever expected to say," she concluded; "but it is due you to know the truth. Besides, I want to prepare you for something that may happen at any moment. That's my duty, too. I am as frail and easily moved as the weakest of women. George, I may some time, in an impulse, promise to marry Olin, and if I do—well, if I do I shall have to forget you, and—" Another sob filled her throat and he saw her fighting it. She turned quickly to the opening and looked out. He rose and stood by her side. He took her soft, cold hand and held it, but he said nothing. The storm was subsiding. The thickest of the clouds were massed against the northern horizon; patches of blue sky appeared directly overhead.

"I understand," he said, in a low, restrained tone, as he released her hand, "and when that time comes I hope I shall not be here."

"Not here?" She gave him a look full of fluttering forebodings. She laid her hand on his breast and seemed to hold her breath while she waited for him to speak.

He sighed. "I didn't intend to mention it yet, but perhaps I may as well, since you've been so frank with me."

"Oh, George, what is it—what is it?"

He smiled mechanically and stroked his dry lips



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with his hand, and then he looked at her bravely. "I think that affair at the school-house decided me on a course I have contemplated for a long time. I thought I might be of use here, but I am sure now that I can't. I am going away. You know I want to practise law. My mother's lawyer at Funstown, Judge Welch, has found an opening for me in Seattle. He says it is a splendid one and that I can give satisfaction to the men who want a junior partner. I ought to go for my own sake, and I shall, of course, take my mother. I must get her away from here. Out there in a new life she will be treated like a normal human being, and from what I've read of the liberality of that country I would not be condemned for the honest views I hold. I once hoped that I could take up the law here, but I am now convinced that it is impossible. No man of my sort could rise in this community."

"And you think—you really think you will go away? You think—" Her face was wrung by a fresher pain. She looked away that he might not see the devastation his words had wrought.

"There is nothing else to do," he said, firmly. "I am not going to give up my fight for life. You see, I've believed and argued that our greatest suffering is, in the end, our greatest good, and I intend to take up my new life with that thought constantly before me. Even in giving you up to another, with whom you will be far more happy than I could possibly make you, I shall be—" He bit his lip and looked down. "But when I think of *that*, all the rest is—is a blank. I may get used to it in time, but at present I can't fancy myself transacting matter-of-

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fact duties away off among new people while you are here with him as—his wife. Wife—wife, my God!”

“And you are going—you are actually going?” Myra cried. “I can’t realize it. I know such a step would be wise, but— Oh, George! if you would only stop thinking as you do. Do you know”—her face lighted up as from a sudden ray of hope—“if you were to stay here and join the church all these people would flock around you. They would be proud of you, and be glad to encourage you. They are that way; they always make more of those who stray away and come back again. It wouldn’t be hard. There is really very little difference in what you and they believe.”

He smiled sadly and shook his head. “On the contrary, there is a gulf between us as wide as the distance from here to the farthest star in the universe. For nearly two thousand years humanity has been going in an exactly opposite direction from the truly ideal one. We know that there was a time when at least twelve men tried to live up to the standard set by Christ, but to-day there is scarcely one on the face of the earth. The world doesn’t even *know* what the main commandment was. In a nutshell, it was to be unselfish. To-day the aim of man is just the opposite. Even the most devout are demanding their salvation through the sacrifice of another. Think of it, Myra. You are not asking me to *pretend* to believe what I don’t—you are asking me *to* believe it. Have you ever thought how impossible it is to force yourself to believe a thing that you don’t believe? If you were on trial for your life, for instance, and you were

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told that your life would be spared provided you would believe that your mother is not your mother, you could not alter your belief."

They were now out in the open, picking their way side by side through the debris of leaves, bark, twigs, and branches of trees. The air was profoundly still. The clouds were rapidly dispersing. In the western sky the rays of the sun had painted, in burning pigment, the sands and surf of an ocean of color, with here and there floating islands of amethyst and pearl.

They reached the road and started homeward together. She seemed not to have taken in nor cared to take in the logic of his last remark. She was silent; her fair brow was furrowed; the downward curves of her lips were rigid, her face was pale and distraught.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked her, suddenly.

"I can't tell you, George," she answered, giving him a stare of utter dejection, "not yet, not yet."

"Forgive me," he said. "I oughtn't to have asked." She seemed busy with perturbed thoughts. Presently he broke the silence, his sorrowful eyes bearing down on her tense face. "With all my disappointment at that meeting," he faltered, "the fact that you did not approve of what I said hurt most. My point of view seemed so plain to me that I thought you would, at least, grant the truth of most of it."

She reflected for a moment, and then, with a frank upward look and a countenance which glowed with earnestness, she said: "Your argument seemed so queer, so unnecessary, so belittling, so—so horribly

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sacrilegious. Your words cut me to the quick and made my cheeks burn almost with anger. I wanted to be faithful to you as a friend who was honest in his belief, but you were attacking what was mine, and the holiest of the holy. Oh, George, you were trying to make a mere flesh-and-blood pygmy of the only-begotten Son of God. You were saying that a mere human being could lift humanity higher than God Himself could. I can only tell you what *I* want in this respect—and I believe the whole Christian world is like me—I am so frail and so conscious of my frailty that I want a God to lean on. No mere man among men will do for me, and that is why God made it so. He understood humanity better than you do, with all your reading and research. You may laugh at me for saying so, but I believe you will see the truth as I do before long. I believe it. I am praying for it. I don't believe God could have given you such a noble, exalted nature and withhold from you the great gift of gifts—simple, unadulterated faith."

He shook his head and sighed, but said nothing. They were now approaching the village. Ahead of them at the side of the road stood a negro man holding her horse by the bridle and waiting for them to draw near.

"I ketched 'im grazin' out dar on de grass, Miss Myra," he said, swinging his hat in one hand and holding the bridle-rein in the other. "De saddle was hangin' under 'im, an' he had de bridle wound round his front laigs. I was afeard you was kilt in de cyclone, an' was jest startin' to you-all's house when I seed you comin' down de road."

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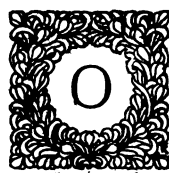
"Thank you, Lias; I'm all right," Myra smiled. "I'm glad you caught my horse. Now I can ride home, and they won't be frightened by seeing the horse without me."

The negro walked on, and George made a step of his hand and lightly lifted her to the saddle. She looked down at him wistfully for a moment, and then she said:

"Don't make any arrangements to go West till you speak to me about it."

He promised, and stood still and watched her ride briskly homeward. He walked on slowly, his head hanging in deep thought. A shudder ran over him. "How can I leave her?" he asked himself suddenly, in the very lees of despair. "How can I give her up to him after what she said—after what she *did*, as she lay there in my arms, knowing it was I that held her? Oh, my God—my God!"

## CHAPTER XX

NE morning old Silas Dwight was in his stable, from which he could see Jane Dawson's house. He remained there, sometimes at the door, sometimes peering furtively through a crack in the wall, till he saw George go out to the wood-pile near the kitchen, pick up his axe, and start across his cotton-field to the mountain.

"He's going up there to chop again," Dwight mused. "I want to see him all by himself. I don't reckon he'd suspicion what I was up to if I was to accidentally run across him. It won't do any harm to try, anyway."

Going into the farm-house, he took down his long rifle, powder-horn, shot-pouch, and game-bag. Peering cautiously through the window of the sitting-room, he saw his wife and son reading on the front veranda. And walking lightly on the smooth, bare floor that he might not attract their attention, he slipped out into the yard, crossed a strip of meadow-land back of the house, and plunged into the forest which clothed the gradual slope of the mountain. Keeping the bare, brown peak which marked the spot where George was at work before him, he forged his way through the vines and thorn bushes. The rugged ground was strewn

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with round stones of a former glacial period, and with pine needles, cones, and heather, which rendered the soles of his boots smooth and made his progress slow and difficult. After half an hour's walk he was near the point he desired to reach. Pausing and breathing rapidly from the exercise, and the rarefied air due to the high altitude, he bent his ear to listen. He was rewarded by hearing the steady blows of George's axe, and, looking in the direction from which the sound came, he saw the top of a stately pine gently swaying against the clear blue sky beyond, and knew that it would soon fall.

"I ought to give some sign that I'm about," Silas shrewdly reflected. "Maybe if I shot at something—" At that instant he saw the gray, fuzzy tail of a squirrel on the limb of a big chestnut-tree. A moment later, by shifting his position, he could see the head and breast of the tiny animal, and he took aim and fired. His aim was true. He saw the squirrel topple from the bough and fall to the ground near by. Hastily picking it up, he put it into his bag. The sounds of the axe had ceased; the top of the pine was slowly moving earthward. There was a sharp cracking of timber followed by a reverberating crash, which jarred the earth under Silas's feet. He now moved onward till he had reached the little opening in which George, axe in hand, his brawny arms uncovered to the elbows and his big neck bare, stood viewing his work. Their eyes met.

"Been out trying my aim," Silas made haste to say, as he grounded his gun and swung his game-bag from his shoulder.

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"I heard your shot, and was about to call out to let you know some one was within your range," George said.

"I heard your chopping, and was careful not to fire your way," Silas answered. "I haven't had much luck—just this little bushy-tail—but I love 'em in pies."

He drew the small, warm body from his bag and held it in his big, splaying hand. George stepped forward and looked at it. He turned its head with the closed eyes upward, and gently stroked its neck and back with his fingers. "It is the female," he said. "No doubt she was getting food for her young. What a pity! what a pity!"

"Oh, I forgot." Silas awkwardly thrust the animal into his bag and swung it back over his shoulder, while a flush crept into his grizzled cheeks. "I forgot that you once said that a body ought not to hunt such things."

"Oh, I can't reform the world," George said, almost apologetically. "I used to kill them when I was a boy. It is only of late that I have thought that it would be better for us, ourselves, if we felt a little more for them, and realized that, in a certain sense, life is as dear to them as it is to us."

"I wonder if that can be so?" Silas sat on the stump of the fallen pine and laid his rifle across his knees. "You say you quit shooting 'em when you grewed to be a man and reasoned. I reckon I'm still in my childhood. Well, I like to hear anything—anything you say—any idea you advance. Somehow I listen more to what you say than any other man. I'm not saying it because it's you;



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but I mean it as the Lord on high is my witness. Even t'other night in all that debate nothing anybody said—Chapman, Mell, or—or Olin, seemed somehow to strike me just right; but when you spoke—well, it was different, that's all—it was plumb different, altogether."

"I'm glad you looked at it that way." George sat down on the trunk of the pine. "Somehow I felt that what I said was falling on deaf ears."

It was as if the older man had something to say, but knew no way to bring it about naturally. He busied himself with the trigger and hammer of his gun. He stood up, put the muzzle to his lips and blew through it, causing a little jet of black dust to issue through the capless tube. He put a charge of powder into the barrel, cut a piece of patching from a cotton rag, and, placing a ball on it, drove it down with a smooth wooden ramrod. Then he resumed his seat, cocked the gun, and put a cap on the tube.

"Yes, I heard every word you said that night—every single word," Silas declared. "I could see that most of the crowd thought it was all one way from their giggles and grunts and sneers. I saw that some of the women—Myra Chapman, for instance—didn't like it, and still it sounded like truth to me. You see, I've tried the old plan, George. I hain't been right for years and years. They say getting religion is as easy as falling off a log, but I know it ain't—it ain't. They say that no matter *what* is on your mind, no matter *what* is bothering you, it will all sluff off the second you believe that Jesus went to God and interceded and

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gave His life and what not to satisfy the divine wrath. As I've heard you say, how could that be a sacrifice as big and awful as they claim? Christ always said the earthly life didn't amount to anything, nohow, and that the other was all the one that was worth having, so when He give this one up, and entered what He knew was to be eternal bliss, He couldn't have felt as miserable and sorry as they claim He did. You see them two things don't hitch at all. On the face of it, it looks like a patched-up job of a lot of folks away back in the past that was bent on making a religion that would keep people of that day and time straight. The view you take seems reasonable, but I want you to tell me what you think of this. Now, the plan these folks believe in actually does help 'em to wipe out and begin over again. There is old Throgmartin, who killed a man just after the war. I've seen him sing and shout with the rest, and I even went so far as to get him off one day and gradually lead him up to talk about it. It was a hard job, because he kept tacking off on side issues, but after a while I pinned him down to it point-blank, and asked him if the matter ever troubled him. He looked a little serious, and chewed his tobacco slower and spit more. Finally he owned that for years after the deed—especially when the widow was having such a hard time making a living and schooling the children his act had made fatherless—he had bothered considerable; but he said he took it all to meeting during a rousing revival and unloaded it. And since that day he had been plumb contented. The man he killed was a professing Christian, and was, no doubt,

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better off; the widow had married a well-to-do fellow that she liked even more than her first choice, and the children all had a fair start in life, and, as far as he could see, the outlook was good. Now, what I want to know, George, is this: what would *your* plan do for a man in Throgmartin's fix? Or, wait, what would it do for him, for instance, if the widow *hadn't* married again, and had been unable, well, for one reason or another to—to find a suitable mate, or to get anything in the shape of happiness for herself or the children? And suppose she harbored in her heart such a hate for the author of her trouble—now, now that's my point—and such a hate for God for allowing such a scamp to exist and cross her path that she turned her back square against religion and everything of the sort. Now, now, we have it!" Silas fumbled the smooth stock of his gun with restless fingers, and stared straight into the face of his hearer. "What would your plan do for such a fellow as that?"

"I don't know, I really don't," George returned, thoughtfully.

"You say you don't?" Dwight's chin fell, and a deeper shadow crept across his face. "You say you don't know. I reckon your plan don't extend wide enough to—to take in folks as bad off as that. I reckon *no* plan would, and"—Silas's voice sank lower and faltered—"don't you reckon that it was, in some such human experience as that, that early man first got his idea of eternal damnation, gnashing of teeth, wailing of lost souls in the vast outer darkness, and all the like?"

"You reason queerly," George answered, with a

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sympathetic glance into the anxious old eyes. "You have doubts, and your doubts have led you into morbidness. You used to be an active member of the church, and have found, perhaps, as many of us have, that it doesn't quite satisfy your longings. You are, perhaps, embarrassed more than the average man because your son is a minister and you feel that many expect you to support him. You are too sincere a man to be hypocritical, as many another would be in your fix, and altogether you are upset. I've noticed it for a long time and been genuinely sorry for you. I am sure, however, that you will come out all right."

"Maybe, maybe. I hope so, George, though I don't know. I don't know." A look of startled craftiness had crept into the old face. With his thumb-nail he pried open the brass lid of the little cap-box in the stock of his gun and shook the contents about. Then he closed the lid and sighed.

"There is a thing I thought I ought to mention to you." He raised a wavering glance to the face of his companion. "It wasn't any of my business, and I have no right, in one way, to speak of it, but it seems to me that you ought to know."

"Why, what is it?" George asked, wondering afresh over the man's mien and persistent circumlocution.

"I'll just tell you how I happened to hear it, and you can draw your own conclusions." Dwight's voice was thick and heavy, and he cleared his throat as if to divest it of a certain tremor which threatened to disturb his would-be casual utterance. "Yes, I'll just tell you the plain facts. It was the day after your speech at the school-house, and I was at Petti-

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gree's store sitting around with the balance seeing and listening to what was going on. More folks than usual was on hand, and a lot was being said first by one and then another about the speaking. The talk kept getting hotter and hotter between Mell and Chapman, and one thing led to another till Chapman got to arguing that evil in one form or other had always pursued folks outside the regular religious flock. He strung out a long list of rich, prosperous men, and cited that they was all believers of the true doctrine and paid their tithes to some established order. I reckon that give him his chance, for—for he come on down to you and Olin. He stood you side by side as poor boys obliged to work for a living. He said you'd seen fit to take up odd notions and that nobody in the community had wanted to extend a helping hand, but that Olin was just the opposite. He had determined to spread the Gospel, and give his life and brain to the salvation of his fellow-man, and what had happened? Chapman said he had gone down into his own pockets and made other men do the same, and all the funds Olin needed was heaped on him. He was rough on you, George, but Chapman would be rough on anybody that went against him. He said Olin was already a shining light, that pulpits on all sides was anxious to get him for big pay, while the Almighty Himself would see to it that you'd remain as you are all your life. Well, that made Mell mad. I didn't know he had a temper—he is such a joker—but he certainly let himself loose. He pounded the counter with his fist till the scales rattled. He offered to bet Chapman that it wouldn't be twelve months before you

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was well off, and that it would all come because you had had the bravery to stand up in the face of such overwhelming odds to what your reason dictated and your conscience commanded. He said you had in mind taking up the law away off somewhere in the West, and that more money would back the project than Chapman or his friends ever had put up on Olin. He said when the truth got out they would all laugh on the other side of their faces. Chapman tried to get him to explain what he meant, but he went off too mad to talk, and throwing back hints and threats as fast as his tongue could flop."

"They made him mad," George remarked, with a smile. "He was only trying to get even."

"I thought so myself *at the time*." The lids of Dwight's eyes were drawn close together, as from the sheer concentration of his mental faculties. "You see, all that was public, George, but the rest—the rest I want to tell you wasn't intended for me or anybody else but the one man that heard it. It was this way, and you can make what you like out of it. The talk I've just told you about took place in the morning about eleven o'clock. I had a jaw tooth that was giving me trouble, and I went right over to Doctor Patterson's office to let him see it. He said the root had decayed and it had to come out, and he pulled it. I was in some pain even after he got it out, and he gave me a drink of some drug or other, and told me if he was in my place he would not walk home in the sun while it was so hot. He showed me a lounge in the next room, and said I could lie down and rest there as long as I wanted to, as he was going to the country. I

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did lie down. I heard him go out, and I tried to take a nap, but I couldn't. You know, I reckon, that Col. Toby Trotter's law office is in the next room. Well, while I was lying there I heard Trotter come in with Mell. The partition is just thin boards, and I could hear plain. They had been talking before they got there, and so I didn't hear the first part; but, George, Mell was there to draw up some paper or other, and he wanted it fixed just right. Every now and then he'd grunt in contempt, and throw in Chapman's name. I heard him just as plain as you hear my voice now—I heard him say he didn't intend to put it off a single other day, that he was a childless old bachelor and had no near kin, and that life was uncertain, and that he wasn't going to run no risks of leaving undone what ought to be done; but that not a word was to be said about it yet awhile. He kept telling Trotter that over and over—that the thing wasn't quite ripe, but would be a big surprise to all concerned."

"I see what you think," George said, when Dwight had paused out of breath and sat leaning forward tentatively; "but it would never do to be misled by a thing of that sort. It would be easy enough for you to fancy—"

"I ain't fancying anything," the old man broke in, suddenly. "I can't say how much or what was involved, but I know you were in it, for I recall distinctly that—that—" The speaker started suddenly; his voice faltered; a faint flush crept into his tanned face, and his flurried glance went to the ground.

"What was it you recall?" the young man questioned.

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Dwight swallowed; his glance still clung to the ground. "Why, George, I know you were mixed up in it, for—for Mell wanted to know pine blank if—if your present name, the—the maiden name of your mother would hold as yours in law as—as firm and solid as—as—"

"Oh, I see." A wistful expression dawned in the young man's face, and he avoided the speaker's stare.

"Trotter told him yes; that you'd be entitled in law to the name you go by the same as any other, and promised to have the document drawed up in good shape and properly witnessed; and Mell went off whistling like he does sometimes when he is in a good humor. George, you know Mell is powerful well-off. He not only owns his mill and big plantation, but another river-bottom place over in the valley that he keeps rented, and they say he's got stock in a big cotton-mill at Funstown, and an interest in a warehouse business, and—well, don't you reckon he may have taken a notion that he'd—you see, Tom Mell is good-hearted, and he thinks a powerful lot of you, and—"

"We must not speculate over anything of that kind," George broke in, gently. "You happened to overhear what was not intended for your ears, and I wouldn't have Mr. Mell know that you had spoken of it to me for anything. Do you understand? You simply must not whisper the matter to anybody—it is too delicate a thing to talk about, or even *think* about. Besides, I don't need help from him, nor any one. I may go West and take up the law; but I won't need outside aid."



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"Oh, George, I wouldn't tell it for worlds." Dwight's voice was charged with emotion to the point of breaking. "But I couldn't keep from putting two and two together. I laid awake nearly all that night thinking of all it might mean to you. Why, don't you know—can't you see that if Mell was to let it out that he was going to leave you a chunk of money, that nothing would stand in your way? Chapman, for instance—why, he'd—he'd quit thinking of Olin like he does and fawn after you. His religion is only a makeshift. He'd let you believe what you pleased if you had plenty of cash. George, George, you can't hide it! You love Myra. You'll never love anybody else, and you ought to have her—I say you ought to have her."

Profoundly moved, George sat motionless and silent for a minute; then he said: "You have mentioned Myra to me before; why is it that you seem to sympathize with me in—in that particular thing when you must be aware that your son—"

"I know," Dwight interrupted, in a flurry of alarm, "I know I have, and I don't know as I'm prepared to tell you *why*—exactly why—I sorter side with you when Olin is headed that way, too. But, George, maybe it's because you seem so cut off from other folks, so hounded, so abused, and because you stand so firm for what you think is right and high against such big odds. It is different with Olin; he's got a lot to back him. He's got his mother and her sickening pride, and all them traipsing women that fetch him flowers and presents; he's got the whole community to sing his praises. Then, if he got Myra, she'd be just a ordi-

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nary wife to him; but to you she'd be your life. Oh, I know—I know how you feel! In some ways you and me are—but I know—I was young once, and I know."

"It is very good of you to be so kindly disposed to me," George said. "I have felt your sympathy for a long time. I feel drawn to you. You seem to be in trouble—the kind of trouble that comes of spiritual unrest. I wish I could help you."

"I reckon nobody alive or dead could do that," was the husky answer as Silas rose, shouldered his gun, and glanced toward the valley. "I'll be going. I won't mention that private matter; you can count on me."

As he walked homeward the old man muttered much to himself. Sometimes his words fell from his lips under the full weight of utter despondency, again they were buoyant with a touch of hope.

"If Mell really *does* leave him well fixed," he said once, as he paused and looked back toward the spot where he had left George and from which he now heard the steady strokes of the young man's axe, "if he does that, and I could possibly be the means of giving the poor fellow the girl he wants, then, maybe—maybe this awful ache here"—he struck his breast with his hand—"wouldn't be so keen. For I reckon if it was left to George he'd rather be born like he was and have her than never to have come to life at all. I think *I* would, and I think *he* would."

## CHAPTER XXI



THE morning was clear, hot, and dry. Out in the stable-yard Jane Dawson was harnessing a horse. The antiquated buggy to which she hitched the animal had lost its coating of varnish, and had a dun, nondescript color that resembled gray as nearly as it did its original black. The hubs were large and old-fashioned; the heavy spokes were split and irregular, and the tires loose. Leaving the horse and vehicle standing at her gate, she went into the kitchen and brought out her market-basket and put it into the back part of the buggy. George was at work in the vegetable garden behind the house, and she went to the fence for a final word with him before leaving.

"Your dinner is all ready in the safe," she called out. "You can warm the coffee over on the coals, or you can get cold milk from the spring-house. I'll be home in plenty time to cook supper."

"It's a hot drive for you, and you are not strong," he gently protested. "You'd better keep in the shade as much as possible, both coming and going."

"What's a little trip like that?" she said, lightly, as she turned away.

She had driven through the village and was slowly ascending the sloping red road beyond, when she

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looked back at her farm, which she could easily locate by its boundary fences and the shapes of the fields of corn, cotton, and wheat. "It's a pretty place," she thought, "but George's idea of a fresh, new life in the West is by all odds the best. He will succeed out there because he will get his chance, a thing he'd never have here if he lived a thousand years. But I wonder if I'm going to go, too? Well, I'll see—I'll know to-day, anyway. If he knew what I am afraid of he would be scared, sure enough. I thought he would wake last night when I had my spell. They say Doctor Bell knows his business—that he can almost diagnose a case by looking at a body. Well, I'll see what he says. I hope he won't say I'm plumb done for. I'd like to see a new country and new people, and see my boy get started."

In about two hours she had reached the scattering outskirts of Funstown. It lay in a valley between two hills. Many church spires rose to meet her view. The brick standpipe of the city water-works showed above the trees at the north end of the town, and the gray stone tower and clock of the Court-House marked the exact center of the place. Toward it Jane drove, now meeting on every hand the cramped indications of urban life in the narrow lots and diminutive cottages of the laboring class. Over the town hovered the smoke from the chimneys of many factories. The air was resonant with the clatter of drays, the shouts of negro drivers, the whistle of locomotives, and the escaping of steam from stationary engines. Presently the long main thoroughfare lay before her. Workmen were tearing up the old macadam of the street and replacing it with blocks

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of stones. The awakening activity of the new South had reached the town. Many signs advertising real estate, the sale by auction of additions to the place beyond the incorporate limits, were in evidence. Freshly painted boards on the corners indicated the new names of the streets, which the residents now rolled over their tongues in buoyant pride as they did the recently announced numbers of their houses.

Stopping at a produce store, Jane left her basket of eggs and butter which she had brought to sell, and then she drove on to the livery-stable farther up the street, where she left her horse, with instructions that he be fed and watered at noon. This done, she turned up the street, carefully scanning the overhead signs which swung from the brick walls. Presently she paused before one at the entrance of a stairway leading to a number of offices above a dry-goods store.

"This is right," she said. "I hope the doctor isn't busy. I want it over with. One way or another, I want it settled, so I can tell what to count on. If he was to decide against me, there would be a lots and lots to attend to and put in order."

Ascending the steps, she came to a closed door at the first landing. A smaller sign on the door told her that she had reached her destination, and she rapped. The door was opened by a small negro boy, who invited her in and pushed a chair toward her.

"I want to see Doctor Bell," she announced. "Is he about?"

The boy told her the doctor had stepped across the street to see a patient at the hotel, and would be right back. The boy went to a window and looked out,

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and then sat down on the sill and took up a newspaper and began to read with mute, moving lips, the jagged nail of a brown finger pointing out the words.

Through an open door Jane saw a reclining-chair of metal and leather, also an operating-table covered with a white cloth, and a shelf holding glass jars containing repulsive-looking specimens preserved in alcohol. Jane regarded a spot on the worn rug at her feet and shuddered. Then she looked at the boy and asked, querulously:

"Do you see anything of the doctor yet? I've got a long way to drive back home, and don't want to sit here all day."

Reluctantly the boy stopped reading, stood up and looked from the window.

"Yes, um, I see 'im." The boy yawned and struck a fly on the window-pane with his paper. "He's standin' at de bank do' talkin' ter some mo' men."

"Well, you go tell him I'm here," Jane retorted.

As if glad of an excuse to leave his post, the boy snatched his hat from the floor and sped down the stairs. In a few moments the doctor entered. He was a man past sixty years of age, had long, gray whiskers and hair, and blue eyes which held a pleasant and kindly twinkle.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Jane!" His expression grew serious as he shook her thin hand and gravely studied her wan face. "What's wrong? What's wrong?"

"That's what I come to find out from you," Jane answered, vaguely, disturbed by his question and tone.

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"What did you put it off so long for?" he asked her, as he reached out and took her hand again. He stood close to her and raised her eyelids and examined the balls. "Huh, bilious in the bargain! What did you wait so long for?"

She coughed and tried to speak casually. "I don't know. I reckon I simply dreaded knowing *for sure* about it. Last night, though, I made up my mind that I'd come. I didn't want to go to a doctor over there. I'd hate to have everybody saying I was bad off, and they talk a lots."

"I suppose so." Doctor Bell's gravity of manner lay heavily on him. "But you did wrong not to consult somebody right away. When I examined you three years ago, I warned you to be careful, but I see you haven't been so."

"No, I went on just about the same, but — what do you think now?"

Rising, he took a stethoscope from a case on a table, opened her dress at the neck, and applied it to her chest and listened attentively. Then, laying the instrument aside, he put his ear first against her bosom and then against her back.

"Take a deep breath," he said, gently. "No, deeper! Now count three, slow and out loud. Say, don't tell me you are scared." He essayed a smile and a jest when she had obeyed. "You hardy mountain women are brave enough to fight cata-mounds. I know you are not afraid of natural diseases. They come to everybody in their turn. There! there! that will do."

He drew himself erect, and she was sure he avoided the steady glance of inquiry she fixed on his face,

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for he looked out of the window. "Pete," he cried out to his boy, who was on the sidewalk below, "drive my horse to the well and water him." Then he turned back rather reluctantly to his patient.

"Who came to town with you?" he asked.

"Nobody," she made slow reply. "George was busy, and, besides, I didn't want him to know if you decided anything was wrong, *bad wrong*, I mean."

"And you drove all that way in the sun?"

"It wasn't so very hot. I hardly felt it."

"I guess not; you haven't enough flesh and blood to—" He went no further. He stood at the window and thrummed on the dusty pane for a moment, his brow furrowed.

"Aren't you going to give me something, Doctor?" She was conscious of the sheer insincerity of her query, which was meant to draw him out of the silence on his part which held so much that was foreboding. It seemed to her that she could actually hear the beating of her heart exaggerated by the thin frame which held it.

"There is nothing that I think of now," he said, turning to his table and leaning against it, "except a prescription to relieve your cough when it is at its worst. Have you any near relatives here in town?"

She read his meaning, and her keen eyes wavered as they swept his face slowly and probingly.

"No, I haven't any kin here at all," she faltered. "What do you want to know that for?"

"When is George coming in?" He parried the question and drew out a pad and began to write.

She made no reply, and he knew she had not only divined the worst, but refused to bandy words about



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it. He finished writing, and, folding the slip of paper, he said, "I'll send this to the drug store on the corner, and it will be ready for you when you start out."

"You needn't ask about George or anybody, Doctor," she said, unsteadily. "I see bad news is coming, and I want to hear it in plain words. That's what I come for. A woman of my age can tell when she is in a serious condition. I've been staving it off, and keeping up somehow or other for my boy's sake; but it can't go on like that. Yes, I'm prepared. It might be bad for some women to be told the straight truth in such a case; but I can stand it. If the worst comes I'll make the best of it."

"I make a habit of not—not telling patients bad news," the doctor said; "but, Jane, you have been through a great deal, and show that you are an extraordinary woman; so in your case, I feel it my duty to say that if you have matters of importance to put into shape, why—"

"I understand." Jane's words fell after a moment of grim silence. "And I've got a lots to attend to. I want as much time as I can get. How long do you think I might—?"

It was his shrug that checked her, together with the awkward meeting of his brows. He took her wrist again, under a pretext which she readily fathomed, and tested her pulse.

"Tell me," she finished, with a dry gulp, as she withdrew her hand and let it drop to her knee. "I'm my own boss; I always have managed my affairs, and must stand this. I am perfectly able to hear bad news—the worst—the very worst!"

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"Well, it might come any minute," the doctor said. "You are in a serious condition. Your lungs are affected, and your heart is weak. There is no use worrying. We all have to die, and I know you are a brave woman. You will have to make up your mind to it. But if you've got matters to attend to you'd better be quick about it. You must take care of yourself. You oughtn't to be left alone for a minute."

Jane said nothing. She lowered her head that he might not see the lines her doom had scrawled on her face. The noise of traffic in the busy town came in at the window. A boisterous laugh from a group of loungers on the street-corner was heard; the tingling of a telephone bell in a dental office adjoining; the low voice of some one transmitting a message.

"I am much obliged to you, Doctor," Jane heard herself saying, from lips which seemed stiff and a tongue that was dry and clung to the roof of her mouth. "I'll make the best of it. I promise you that." She was silent for a few moments, and then she took quite another tack. She pushed back her bonnet and met his eyes freely.

"Doctor," she began, "you may think it is powerful foolish of me, but I want to ask you a plain question. You and I are old friends, and I can talk free with you. There has been a good deal of discussion over religious matters out our way, and in it all I must say I've let myself get upset. I don't know what to believe, or whether it is worth while even thinking about such things. I've heard preachers talk, and men who denied preachers, but

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I never have yet got an opinion from a disinterested outsider like you, for instance. It always seemed to me that doctors say less and bother less about the question than any other class o' men, and I would like for you to tell me right out plain whether, in your best judgment, you think there is anything to be expected in the way of life beyond the grave?"

Doctor Bell stared at her in surprise, and his color heightened slightly.

"That is a very pointed question," he answered, "and I don't know as I ever had it put to me so square before—that is by anybody in bad health like you are in. I see what you are after, though, and I wish I had the power to answer satisfactorily. I've heard how you and George have been looking at these things, and, considering how much abuse you must have received, I'm glad to tell you that what is bothering you has bothered many other smart, thinking people. I heard a lot of it when I was in medical college. Students that cut and dissect the human anatomy, I reckon, get their minds so much fixed on material things that they scarcely give a thought to the matter you are inquiring about. Of course, I'm a member of the church, and go as regular as I can, considering the call that is made on my time; but just between us, I never have been much concerned about it one way or the other. You may think it strange, but I don't believe I'd walk across that street to find out whether there is, or is not, a life to come. I reckon, if I once got my mind on it, I might bother to some extent, but I've been so busy that—well, you see how it is."

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"Yes, I see; I see," Jane returned, the cloud still on her face. "You don't care at all about it, and yet some contend that the best proof we have that there *is* something ahead is the belief of it away down in every heart, savage or civilized. As for me, I don't believe there is a thing—not a blessed thing—but trouble and trials here, followed by death and decay. A bright life after this would certainly be the work of a kind, merciful God; but there can't be a merciful God that would subject a creature to what I've been through. Why, He ain't even going to let me go to my grave in peace after my long, hard life. I'm suffering right now; first, about what's to become of George, and, next, in an awful fear of death. I try not to be so, but, Doctor, I'm scared. I'm not scared of everlasting punishment—I can't think the Creator would be that hard on us—but I am of—of *something* I don't know what—but *something*."

"I see, I see," the doctor humored her. "When you stop to reflect on it, there really is very little a person can count on. I'm talking pretty plain to you, because you are a woman of brains and deep thought. If I was to talk this way in public I'd never have another call. Doctors are a little like preachers in this day and time. I've been called on to pray at a death-bed more than once, and I've felt that it was my duty to comply. I've seen some sad sights, too."

"I reckon you have," Jane replied. "I've never seen anybody die. I didn't go into the room either time when ma and pa died. I just didn't want to—without being called, and they didn't send

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for me. But I'd better be going. Good-bye, Doctor. I'll step over and see Judge Welch, and then I'll get the medicine and go home. He's writing to a law firm in Seattle about taking George in partnership. George counts on taking me along; but, as you know, that will never happen."

"I'm afraid not," Doctor Bell returned, frankly, as he accompanied her to the door. "You'd not be equal to such a long trip, and you must take care of yourself. There is nothing I can do."

The doctor had closed his office door and turned to a window, but, not hearing the step of his patient on the stairs, he went to the door and looked out into the passage. She was standing at the head of the steps, her hand on the railing.

"Do you feel weak?" he asked. "Perhaps I'd better give you a—"

"No, it wasn't that," she returned, looking into his kindly eyes. "But I thought I'd like to ask you another favor. Doctor, if George happens to come in town, I wish you wouldn't tell him how bad—how very bad off I am. For him to know wouldn't do any good, and I've got reasons for not telling him right now. He's had so much trouble already, of one sort or other, that I'd rather not have him brooding over me. I'd rather, you see, have it come all of a sudden and be over with, so as to worry him as little as possible."

The doctor promised, rather reluctantly, and expected her to leave, but she still lingered.

"There is something else, Doctor," she faltered. "I ought to ask you about it—I'll be sorry when I get home if I don't. There isn't anybody over

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there that I could talk as free with, and you are very kind—the kindest man I ever knew. You are mighty gentle and full of sympathy, and I feel like you'd advise me right. Doctor, I'm bothered—bothered a lot. My mind isn't easy over something. Folks tell me that if I hadn't raised George to think like he does, that he'd have made a useful member of the church and a better citizen. Some say, too, that if he believed like the rest, the—the misfortune of his birth would be overlooked, and that he could marry among the best in the community and be happy. I reckon that is so, and, somehow, I don't like the idea of the poor boy turning his back on the country he was born in and moving away out West among strangers, and if there was a thing I could do to prevent it I'd do it. Now, you know humanity as well as anybody. Do you think—" Jane's voice sank into indistinctness. She cleared her throat, coughed, brushed her lips with a quivering hand, and finished: "Do you think if I was to make a profession, and join the church again and agree to do my part, that it would do any good? You see, some think George is already powerful near their way of thinking. He certainly believes in a life to come, and I've heard some of them say that he was, in some respects, the best Christian they ever run across. I know he has hopes so high and pure that I can't understand them. Doctor, what would *you* do if you was in my place?"


The physician was silent for a moment, then he answered, rather awkwardly: "I don't see, Jane, that any harm could come of your going back to church. In fact, much good might result. I have

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my doubts, as I said, you know; but I keep my membership on account of my family—my wife and children, and the good I can do in my way. I reckon you have made a mistake in fighting organized effort as you have, but you must judge for yourself. You are the one to decide."

"I'm going to think it over." She held out her hand and smiled faintly. "Anyway, I'm much obliged to you. Telling it all to you has made me feel better."

## CHAPTER XXII

HE following afternoon Myra stood on the veranda of her father's house. She had been pruning the honeysuckles which clung to the lattice, and tying into place the refractory young sprigs which threatened to fall to earth from their own succulent weight. The sun in a cloudless sky beat mercilessly down on the fields of corn and cotton, and on the dusty clay road which led through the village to the rocky passes of the mountains. In a meadow beyond Jane Dawson's house she could see George at work. He wore a broad straw hat lined with green calico, and was without a coat, his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows. He sat on the spring seat of a new mowing-machine, and was a veritable poem of physical manhood, power, and grace. Now and then she heard the sound of his voice as he spoke to the pair of horses he was driving, and the buzz and clatter of the wheels and blades. He was cutting hay, and at times the perfume of the bruised clover and grasses which fell in his wake was wafted to her like an incense proffered to her being. Something told her that he had seen her, and she lingered over her work, feeling that his eyes were often on her.

But this delectable mood was ruthlessly disturbed.



## Jane Dawson

Olin Dwight came hurriedly across the grass from his father's house and ascended the steps and stood beside her. Her eyes on George, she was glad to note that his back was turned.

"I have only a minute to spare," Olin panted, as his admiring glance rested on her lithe form so becomingly clad in white muslin. "The Fox sisters have sent for me to come and talk and read to them, and I made a short cut across your yard. Would you like to go?"

She hesitated. George was turning his horses, and the next moment he would face them, and she experienced a shock of aversion to being seen idling there with his rival at a time when George was so hard at work. As quick as a flash she acted.

"Come and help me," she said, and, followed by him, she stepped down to the ground, where they were out of the sight of the toiler, and caught up a trailing vine. "Hold it," she said, "and let me tie it."

He obeyed, not suspecting her motive. His soft, white fingers touched hers, and he caught her hand and attempted to hold it, but she twisted it from his grasp.

"Don't! don't!" she said, impatiently, her tone crisp and sharp.

A look of chagrin twisted his features awry. He turned almost pale as he held the vine while she tied the twine to it. There was a cold gleam in her eye, a certain resentful firmness in her fingers.

"Forgive me," he faltered, still with the expression of pain about his lips. "I'm afraid you are colder to me even than you used to be."

## Jane Dawson

She made no immediate reply. George's mellow voice bore down on her like reproachful music above the insistent snarl and hum of his machine. "I lay in his arms willingly," she said to herself. "I returned his kisses. I drew his dear head down and pressed my lips to his. Oh, I can't—I can't allow another to make love to me." Turning to her companion she saw the signs of his distress without a touch of regret.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," she said, coldly. "But you mustn't do that again, Olin. I—I haven't given you the—the *right* to do it."

"I know—oh, I know!" he sighed; "and I am afraid I'll never have it. In fact, I'm afraid of something I've never dared to mention—hardly dared think about."

She well knew what he meant. Her heart beat quickly. She almost hoped that he would mention it. She wanted to hear some one associate her with the delicious phenomenon of emotion which had beset her. She was ready to deny or confirm any charge.

"I can't imagine what you are talking about," she answered, her eyes now deliberately probing every despondent line in his face.

"I'll leave you to guess," he returned. "It won't take you long. But remember this: I'll not reproach you, Myra. I'm in the hands of God, and so are you. If we are not intended for each other, then I must be resigned to it. Even if I lost you, it might be a trial put upon me for some divine purpose."

"Yes, yes," she heard herself murmuring, ab-

## Jane Dawson

sently; "but, Olin, I haven't said decidedly that I wouldn't—I promised to think about it seriously, and I am—I am. Don't hurry me; please don't. You said you would be patient and wait for me to fully know my—heart. You know you did."

"Yes, I shall be patient," he returned, in rising tones, his face clearing. "Now I shall run on and read to those dear old souls. I shall put my heart in it, for it is not all over between us—is it?"

"No, Olin," she softened. "It is not over. You are a dear, dear boy, and I'll do what I feel to be best for us both; but I can't decide now—not just now. I must think about it longer."

When he had walked blithely away, Myra went across the sward to some pink roses in full bloom near the fence, where she paused, shears in hand. Beyond the road she saw Jane Dawson pottering about among the scant, dust-coated flowers in her yard. The lone woman was bent downward, had a more emaciated look than usual, and her step was slow and tentative.

"I'll take her some flowers," Myra said. "She likes such attentions." And, cutting a huge bunch of her prettiest roses, Myra passed through the gate and went down to Jane. The older woman's back was turned to her, and, as Myra had opened and closed the gate noiselessly, Jane was not aware of her approach. Indeed, she was muttering to herself as she bent to examine the famishing shrubs in the flower-beds.

"Oh!" She looked up with a start. "I didn't know you were about."

"I thought you might care for these," Myra be-

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gan, her color rising. "They are dropping to pieces in our yard, and I want some one to get the benefit of them."

Jane took the flowers with an air of actual eagerness. She pressed them to her wan face and inhaled a breath of delight.

"You are mighty, mighty good to me," she faltered. "There is hardly a day that I don't think of your kindness, and want to bless you. Come round the house with me; it is a little more shady there, and I can see George better. It's company for me to look at him. It is sad, too, for he has life before him. Isn't it queer that we should regard life as so gloomy and heartless, and yet feel sure the end of it is—is even worse? My child, have you ever been afraid to die—actually afraid of it?"

Myra glanced at her wonderingly, as they slowly walked round the house into the shade on the other side where two plain, split-bottomed chairs leaned against the wall.

"No, I've never been afraid to die," the girl answered. "Some persons are, but I've never felt that way."

"You say you haven't." Jane sat down in one of the chairs, and motioned Myra to take the other. She sighed. "Well, I don't know as there is anything strange about that. At your age—or a little earlier, at least—I was that way. Everything was full of golden promise. Deep trouble, though, makes a person study a lot about it. If your portion is real bad, you are likely to count on more that's bad ahead. I'm glad I've got this chance to talk to you private-like. I'm afraid I've got all

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upset between hate for some folks and love for my boy, and that I'm actually unable to judge for myself in some matters. Now, this thought has come to me, and it has got so deep-rooted that it bothers me night and day. I'm not *plumb* sure that I've acted wisely all these years. I'll tell you what started me to thinking on this line. When I was a girl, just after war-times, when feeling was so rampant and high, there was a poor scrub farmer living close to us who was a Union man. He was the only one anywhere about, and he loved to talk his views, and made himself powerful unpopular. The mountain men at one time banded together and took him out and gave him a hard lashing on his bare back, but even after that he talked just as much as ever, got even more outspoken and stubborn. He had a poor, sickly wife, and a nice, pretty daughter. One day I had a talk with the girl, and she said she was the most miserable creature that ever lived. She said it was all on account of her father's politics. She hid her head in shame, never visited other young girls, and nobody went to see her. Now, you see, that man no doubt thought he was right; but he kept on, I reckon, until his right become a wrong. You see, he was in the very midst of good-hearted people who had lost their kin and property, and had nothing to make a fresh start on, and, instead of being sympathetic, he rubbed their troubles in on them with his taunts and sneers. Now, you see"—Jane's eyes were averted from the wondering stare of her visitor, and there was a visible quiver to the roses she held—"you see, my child, I'm wondering if—if I

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haven't been like that myself. I was wronged to start with, and begun a fight against my surroundings that grew hotter and hotter. But—and here is the point—my boy George, like that man's daughter, has to bear the brunt of it. The girl, being weak and frail, sunk under it; but George, being a man, you see, just naturally took up my fight, and has—has, in consequence, been plumb upset in all his chances. He's an outsider where he ought to stand in the front rank. He's everything by nature that a young man ought to be, and yet—well, there are *some* things the poor boy don't ever hope to get. Sometimes it looks like he actually thinks he is of different flesh and blood from the rest of humanity. He ain't, though, for he hungers—for certain things with an agony that burns like fire in his eyes. I've seen him slip into the house when—when, well, when you and Olin were about to drive past. He was trying to keep from seeing you two together. His face would be as white as death and his mouth all drawed down and quivering.”

“Oh, don't!—don't! please don't!” Myra cried, her breast rising and falling tumultuously. “You mustn't say that. George and I are such good, true friends that I wouldn't hurt his feelings for—”

“I know you wouldn't,” Jane interrupted; “that is, you wouldn't do it on purpose, but sometimes we can't help ourselves. We have to give pain now and then when we wouldn't do it for worlds. Heaven knows I wouldn't make him suffer, and yet I've loaded him down with all the troubles he ever had. I done it to gratify spite and to add

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flame to hate. Child, I'm done for. I'm at the end of my fight. You church folks claim that the Lord scourges and scourges them that He loves till they humble themselves in the dust, and I wonder if there may not be truth in it. Now, I'm coming to my point, and, young as you are, I want your plain advice. I got away from these people so far back, and when I was so young, that I can't tell how they would treat me—if—if I was to—to change? Now suppose this: suppose I went forward at meeting and admitted that I was a backslider—told them right out in public that I saw I'd made a big mistake, and wanted and needed their good-will, do you reckon—my child, do you reckon—?"

Myra's face was beaming with glad emotion, unshed tears glistened in her eyes and moistened her lashes. With her slender hands interlaced she leaned forward.

"Oh, it would be so sweet, so noble, so grand of you!" she cried.

"And you think—you think they would act different afterward—that they would be disposed to—you know I am not thinking of myself at all—but would it"—here Jane's eyes became fixed intently on the girl's face—"would it—do you reckon it would put George in—in a different light?"

"Oh, it would do everything—everything!" Myra avowed. "It isn't his nature to be at odds with his surroundings, and these people would take you both into their arms with love and kindness. They have shown their worst side because they've been opposed. Oh, I do hope you really will—"

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"I don't know yet *what* I'll do, or if I will be able to do *anything*," Jane broke in, frankly. "Laying down the pride of a lifetime is hard, but I am thinking about doing something. George is planning to go West, and somehow I think he would be happier here where he's always lived. Judge Welch says the opening in Seattle is a good one, but that he's willing and even anxious to take George in with him at Funstown. So, you see, the boy can take his choice, and it seems to me that if things was—smoother here, this country might be the best. I may be wrong, but I believe if I was to—to be reinstated in church, that he would join, too."

"I'm sure he would," Myra declared, her throat tight with joy. "I am sure it would make him happy. I don't know that I have a right to speak of it, but he told me only a short time ago that he was unhappy because you had given up the hope of a future life."

"Well, as for that—as for *that*—" A shrewd shadow of precaution swept the wrinkled face, and Jane steered away from the topic. "If I go in with you all, I'll do my level best to live in harmony. There is another thing that you may know better than I do. Olin has been invited to preach over at Ringgold, hasn't he?"

"Yes, next Sunday. He was writing his sermon yesterday. A Mr. Tillman is going to fill his place here for that day."

"And Sarah—I mean his mother—do you happen to know whether she is going along with Olin?"



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"Yes, I know she is, because Olin told me she had bought the cloth and was making a new dress to wear with the new hat Olin's Bible class gave her. A Mr. Thornton, who is the richest man at Ringgold, is going to send his carriage over for them, and his wife is to give them a reception. They are to be gone several days."

"Humph! you don't say!" Jane's face hardened. She looked at the ground in a fierce stare for a moment, then she shrugged her bony shoulders. "That will be next Sunday, you say? Well, I may, and I may not do it. I may back plumb down, but if it happens at all, it will be then, I reckon. Seems powerful close at hand, doesn't it? Le' me see, this is Wednesday—just three more days!" A shudder shook her from head to foot.

The shadows behind the house had grown long, the air was cooler; the clatter of the mowing-machine had ceased. The thought came to Myra that George might appear at any moment, and she felt averse to his finding her there.


When Myra had gone, Jane went into the house and took down a vase from the mantelpiece and, filling it with water, placed the roses in it, then, hesitating a moment, she put them on the table in George's room.

"He loves them so much," she said. Her throat was dry and she coughed raspily. "Next Sunday—*just next Sunday*," she sighed, as she shambled back to the rear door and looked out toward the meadow. She shivered as from a chill. "I'd rather go to the gallows," she muttered, "but I'll do it for his sake. I know what Sarah Dwight will think

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when she comes back and is told. She will laugh and chuckle in scorn, and see through it, but I'll have to stand it. I'll have to stand even *that*. I'll go to the night meeting—there won't be as many there as in the morning."

## CHAPTER XXIII

HE following Sunday was clear and moderately cool. The morning and afternoon passed in the usual way except for the fact that instead of reading papers and magazines, as had been her wont, Jane sat in the big kitchen with the family Bible on her knees. Occupied in reading and making notes from some law-books which Judge Welch had loaned him, George gave little thought to what she was doing. However, as the afternoon was waning, and she still sat over the ponderous tome, he put down his books and approached her.

"Picking flaws still?" he said, jestingly. "Well, it is full of them. You can answer any argument on earth by it. People see it so differently—that's why there are so many dissenting denominations."

It was as if she were about to answer. She raised her head, looked at him under a baffled sort of indecision, and moved restlessly in her chair. The great book half closed and began to slide down between her knees. She caught it with her feeble hands and held it open, then she shrugged her shoulders and seemed to be reading.

Her attitude, failure to respond to his remark, and the unusual expression of her face followed him back to his books, and he found himself unable to take his

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mind from her. Leaving his room, he walked around the house and yard, pretending to be inspecting his beehives, the nests of his fowls, the ash-hopper which was dripping with lye for the making of soap on the morrow, but his chief purpose was to watch her through the open kitchen door as he passed to and fro. Finally he strolled toward her and sat down on the wide door-sill. He knew that she was aware of his approach, and he wondered almost with a sinking heart what could have come over her to have produced such a change. He coughed, cleared his throat, and moved his seat from one side of the doorway to the other, but still she failed to look at him. He saw her index finger sliding stealthily from side to side of the page. Presently, and in a constrained tone, he asked:

"Mother, has anything gone wrong? Are you not—not well to-day?"

She seemed to hesitate, then she laid her hand over the page before her, pushed back her bonnet, and looked straight at him. She was almost pale, the lines in her face were tense and rigid.

"I don't know what you are going to think or say," she faltered. "But I hope you won't scold. I reckon a change has come. The other day I had a long talk with Myra. She fetched me the roses in your room. She was so sweet and kind, and we got to talking more intimate-like than common. I don't know how to tell it, but somehow while we was together and she was so young and full of hope and belief in this book and its promises—well, somehow she seemed to take me back to the time I was a girl, too, and had a faith that was—helpful. Then all at

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once I began to wonder if I hadn't maybe stood between myself and the light that is said to do so much for folks; I began to think that maybe I had driven off all good influences by hating a few people so much, and contriving so hard to get even. George, I reckon I've been wrong. The Bible says God makes a habit of scourging His children harder and harder till they just have to give in, and I reckon that's what He's been doing with me. He says here in His book, as plain as day, 'Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' George, I'm weary and heavy laden—I can't bear my load any longer. I've tried to fight it out, but every blow I struck fell on my own heart and soul, and—and on you. Christ's command is to turn the other cheek, but I never did it once. I've heard it said that a body can never get plumb free from the religion of their folks, and right now, as late as it is, the religion of my people seems to be drawing me back. Now, what are you going to say? I'm waiting—I'm waiting."

"To say!" he answered. "What could I say, except that I want you to do as you think best?"

"Do you really, George? You see, I was afraid you might—" She went no further, and bent a wavering glance on the page before her.

"Of course I do," he continued. "I have been worried about you ever since you said some time ago that you had no belief in a life beyond this. To give up that is to give up life itself."

"Well, as for *that*—" She checked herself abruptly, a flash of precaution in her glance, and she patted the book in her lap. "This makes *that*

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all right. We have only to follow the rules laid down here. Where I made my mistake was turning from the church away back when you was a baby. It isn't too late. They say it is never too late to mend. Are you sure it won't make any difference to you, George?"

"On the contrary, I'm glad," he answered, sincerely. "I am convinced that the good, old-fashioned faith is best for millions of people. You see, they can understand it. It is real to them. It fits perfectly into their humdrum lives and conceptions. It is simple, like they, themselves, are simple."

"George, listen!" She closed the book, and on it rested her sharp, bare elbows splotted with discolorations of the skin. "George, if I hadn't talked to you as I have against these folks and their faith, you'd have growed up like—well, like Olin and Myra and all the rest. It stands to reason that you would. You never saw a young Jew that believed in Christianity, and that was because his parents didn't. Out of pure spite and hate for a few, I've turned you from the accepted faith of the land you was born in. I've done that, all along glorying in the licks you struck at 'em as your mind expanded and you got what you took for new light from far-off sources. But wasn't I a fool to think there was anything holy in a fight like that? Well, I was paid in coin of my own making, for instead of helping you along in—in a life I myself had made hard for you"—Jane's voice sank and shook—"I jest heaped about you hills and mountains you could never climb. Young men born unfortunate like you have

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risen to the top here in the South; but not one I ever heard of was ever taught to insult religion. George, I am going to hope that you won't any longer fight this thing. Something seems to tell me that if you'll quit, now that—that I've quit, and expect to let it be known that I've quit—I say, something tells me that in that case blessings and happiness will come to you—blessings and good fortune, and that is all I live for. A fresh, new hope is burning in me. I believe that I have at last found a way for you, and I don't want you to miss it. George, you won't talk in public like you have been doing any more, will you—will you do that for my sake?"

"I can easily promise that," he answered, a strange sadness tinged with vague alarm flooding his being. "I have already discovered that I cannot make absolute converts to my theories, and I shall not try any longer. If the lives of the few who *say* they understand the subject as I do were any higher or better for their belief, it would be different; but I can't see that they are elevated much."

She watched him under the edge of her bonnet as he walked down to the stable to feed his horses.

"It may come out right," she mused. "He'll keep his word and quit talking, and when I am gone he may join the rest and live right on here and be happy. It is an awful muddle, and I must have been wrong some way—somehow—for at all events they die peaceful, and I can't. I simply can't! It is awful—awful! Even Sarah Dwight will die on a bed of ease, but there is not a ray of light ahead for me—not the faintest shimmer; it is just black, black—cold and black."

## CHAPTER XXIV



HE gray dusk fell upon the face of the land. The chickens and pigs were fed, the cows milked; cold supper, the leavings of the midday meal, was placed on the dining-table in the uncertain light of some pine-knots blazing in the wide chimney. George noticed that his mother partook of little food, but she drank some strong coffee as she stood above the pot which simmered on coals on the stone hearth and regarded him silently. When supper was over, he left her as she was putting the dishes into the perforated tin safe, and went out into the front yard and strolled about aimlessly. He was haunted by a sensitive sense of utter isolation. The philosophy to which hitherto he had clung for consolation and companionship seemed to have deserted him. A vast, morbid despair lay like a strange new burden upon him. He had not loved his mother all his life and humored her every mood to be misled now by what was to her strong character an almost childish and senile pretext. She was playing a part for his sake. And for hers she must be humored. She must be led to believe that her awful, soul-racking sacrifice was not in vain—that the price she expected to receive would be paid. Passing the end of the house, he saw the



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flare of a candle in her room, and in its flickering light he saw her before the mirror of her bureau brushing her scant hair and twisting it into a knot behind her head. He stood wondering for an instant, and then the clanging of the cast-iron church bell furnished the explanation—she was going to meeting. Yes, that was it—she was actually going.

He was leaning on the front gate when she came out, a little, dingy breakfast shawl thrown over her head. She had not seen him in the shadow of the tree near which he stood, and he marveled over her conduct. Carefully treading on tiptoe along the porch to the sitting-room window, she bent and stealthily peered through the blinds. He knew that she was looking for him—that she was trying to leave without attracting his attention. Evidently satisfied that he was not in sight, she came down the steps and strode rapidly, but still cautiously, toward the gate. He would have obliterated himself had it been possible, but as it was he could do nothing but remain where he was. She saw him, and he heard her utter a little gasp of dismay as she checked herself when only a few feet separated them. For a moment she stood as if deprived of the power of speech, and then she advanced to the gate and raised the metal latch.

"I'm going to meeting, George," she faltered. "I am going to meeting, and I may have something to— to say in public you'll think queer. I reckon you will, but somehow it seems to me that I'd rather you wouldn't hear it—that's all—that's all—I'd rather you wasn't there to-night, anyway."

"Well, that's all right," he heard himself saying

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in an awkward effort to appear at ease. "I suppose that is only natural."

"I can't explain it"—she was deliberately closing the gate between them—"but it's just that way. I've talked before you so much and so strong on certain lines that it seems hard to have you hear me—take it all back like I'm going to. I don't care so awful much about them or what they will think—if they will only be more kindly disposed, but—" She seemed unable to formulate her meaning, and, as if she had decided not to conclude her remark, she suddenly left and turned down the road.

She had walked a hundred yards or more when she saw a group of three persons ahead of her. They had evidently lost something, for all three were searching the ground.

"Here it is; I've got it." It was the voice of old Chapman, speaking to his wife and daughter. "A body would think you was rich, throwing money about like that."

Jane was now quite close to them, and Myra recognized her. Saying something to her mother in an undertone, she let her parents walk on and waited at the roadside.

"Mother dropped a fifty-cent piece from her handkerchief," she explained, as she suited her step to her companion's more sluggish one. "I hope you are on your way to meeting. I looked for you this morning. Somehow I thought from the way you talked that you might—"

"Yes, I'm on my way now." Jane's voice was low and halting. "I thought to-night would do as well as any time."

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"I'm so glad—so very, very glad!" Myra's voice was round, full, and encouraging. "I know you will be happier when it is over. At church to-day I prayed all through the service that you might come in at the door. I kept watching and listening."

"You say you did?" The words dropped separate and distinct like bits of metal.

"Yes, I usually am able to follow Olin's sermons word for word, but this morning somehow my mind wandered to what you said, and—"

Jane started, shrank back, and stood staring blankly at her companion. They were quite close to the church now. Great bonfires of pine blazed at the hitching-racks on each side of it and lighted up the scene as bright as day.

"Why, what is the matter?" Myra asked, in surprise.

"Olin!" The name issued raspingly from the rigid lips. "Did he preach to-day? Is he and his mother still here? I thought you said they were going to Ringgold, and that another preacher was to take his place?"

"Yes, I *did* tell you that," Myra explained, "but Olin didn't go. There was a misunderstanding; the minister who was to take his place couldn't come till next Sunday, and so Olin put off the Ringgold engagement till next week."

"Oh!" Jane stood stock-still, her eyes fixed on the lighted windows. At this juncture the iron supports of the bell on the scaffolding in the churchyard creaked and the clapper struck three or four times as a signal that the services were about to open.

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A little, wheezy organ began to play a familiar hymn, and a man's voice led the singing.

"We'll be late," the girl said, persuasively.

Still Jane hesitated. "Is Olin's *mother* going to-night—do you happen to know?"

"Yes, I think so. If I am not mistaken, she passed with him just as we were leaving home. Don't you feel well?—because, if—"

"No, I'm all right." Jane now moved onward with a steady stride. "Nothing's the matter with me. You are a good girl, Myra—the best and sweetest I think the Lord ever made. I know you know what's best for me, and I've put myself in your hands."

They entered the church side by side. But there Jane seemed to forget the girl's presence, for, with a dead stare in her eyes and her face set in bloodless rigidity, she stalked up the aisle to the front bench and sat down, and Myra fell back and joined her mother, who was seated near the center of the house.

"What does the poor thing mean?" Mrs. Chapman asked, as her curious gaze bore down on the lone woman's back.

"I think she is going to join the church," Myra answered. "She said something to me about it the other day."

"You don't mean it! Well, well! Won't that astonish the country?"

But Myra had no small talk to exchange for that ever-ready commodity in her mother's storehouse. She noticed that Olin, from his seat in the pulpit, was regarding Jane with a sympathetic glance, and

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then he looked on to Myra with a gratified glow in his eyes and smiled and nodded knowingly.

The next moment he put his Bible on the little pulpit and, with extended hands, came down to Jane.

"This is not an absolute surprise," he confessed, with a gentle smile and a warm pressure of her stiff, toil-hardened fingers. "Myra hinted to me that you had a change of feeling and that you might come. Oh, I'm so glad! I can't tell you how glad I am. I'd rather have you do this than anything I know of. God will bless you, dear sister. As sure as the stars are shining to-night He'll bless you. Is there any help I can give you—any advice?"

"Will I have to—to say anything?" Jane's bewildered eyes now fell on the perplexed face of Sarah Dwight, who sat slightly bent forward on one of the benches at the side of the pulpit, and all the rest became a blur—a blur out of which that single sinister face emerged, so blank, so placid, and yet so full of unctuous triumph.

"Well, it might be best," the minister answered, still holding her hand. "I mean that it might be best for *you*. You may feel timid and naturally shrink from it, but if you *did* have the courage to speak out you would be sure to be benefited by it. Besides, it would do the others good to hear such a testimonial after all your troubles and—and search for the truth."

"Well, I'll do it then." Jane dropped her eyes to avoid Sarah Dwight's tentative stare. "I'll do it, if you will call on me at the right time. Then, if it wouldn't make any difference—I mean after

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it is over—I'd like to go home. I saw the doctor the other day, and he said I ought not to set up late at night, and—and I feel powerful weak."

"That will be all right," Olin heartily agreed. "Everybody can see that you are not strong; so I'll say a little something by way of introduction, and then you may speak. God will bless you; I'm sure He will."

The singing had ceased. The house was so still when the minister returned to the pulpit that his steps rang loudly on the bare boards of the floor. His face seemed suffused with a divine light as he faced the congregation, leaned on the stand, and began to talk. Jane lowered her head till her open hands received her face and hid it. Many thought she was praying. But she was not. The bodily presence of one woman had annulled, so far as her own consciousness was concerned, the spiritual force of the entire universe. Had God Himself, as of old, in a loud voice from the roof called her name, she would scarce have raised her head, for her own especial hour was at hand, and Sarah, not her Maker, was the tribunal before whom she was to stand and give an account of her transgressions.

She hardly heard what Olin was saying. The far-reaching silence of the moment was dominated by the insistent hum of his voice, which rose and fell on waves of sympathy and elation. A wandering soul had been reclaimed, he declared, and the hosts of heaven were singing in glad token. Along the River of Life there was great rejoicing—rejoicing that extended across the golden sands even unto the throne of God. White-winged messengers were

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trumpeting the good tidings throughout the eternal kingdom. Then Jane became conscious that she had heard her name pronounced, and that the minister, with kind, solicitous glance, was beckoning her to rise.

She stood up. The faces about her formed themselves into a gently rocking sea. She leaned to one side that she might brace herself on the back of the bench. She clutched it with tense, bloodless fingers. She held to it as a drowning man might to a spar. Her lips moved, but her voice lay at the bottom of her throat.

"Louder, please, dear sister," she heard the minister encouraging, and by a superhuman effort she spoke.

"I want you all to forgive me," she said. "I've been wrong. I've been at war with everybody. My life is near its end, and I want to have peace. You all believe in prayer doing good in cases like mine, and I want you to pray for me. I am willing to abide by your rules and regulations. My name is not on the church books. It was taken off years ago. I want it put back. That's all—I reckon there is no more to say."

Still clutching her support, she sank into her seat and bowed her head. Olin gave a signal to the congregation, and they knelt—hobnails and thick soles thundered on the resounding floor. Then out of the silence rose the soft, soothing voice of the minister in prayer. When it was ended they all sat up except Jane. She was unaware that it was over till a woman behind her touched her on the arm and whispered in her ear:

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"Maybe you didn't hear. Brother Dwight says they can all come forward and extend the hand of good-fellowship to you. But if I was you I'd not bother to stand unless you feel strong enough."

Jane mutely nodded her appreciation of the woman's thoughtfulness, and looked about her almost with the dumb stare of an animal at bay. Yes, they were coming. The full horror of the unexpected contingency had burst upon her. The man who led the singing had stepped over the low altar-railing and was beating time with his hands and autocratically announcing a hymn. The low piping of the organ was lost in the tornado of voices. The congregation was a surging, squirming mass. The slats in the seats of the benches creaked as men in the rear stood upon them to get a better view of the drab, desolate candidate. Men, women, and even children passed Jane in single file and bent mechanically to clasp her gnarled and stiffened fingers. Jane scarcely recognized a face or heard a familiar voice. Her very power of breathing seemed to have deserted her. Then, as the maddening procession was at last thinning, she saw something the fresh horror of which fairly stilled the beating of her heart. It was Sarah Dwight standing by her son smiling complacently, her plump, ringed hand on his arm. She was waiting her turn to do her official duty as the pastor's mother. In a moment she would come, Jane told herself. Sarah would come and extend her soft hand with that firm withholding of her metaphorical skirts from contamination, and speak—Jane phrased it accurately—as she might to a repentant negro woman behind the bars of a prison.



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Then in sheer agony, and as if from some hereditary puritanical instinct of a doomed soul forced to look heavenward, Jane cried deep down in her throat:

"Save me—have mercy, oh, Lord, have mercy!"


The prayer seemed to be answered, for Myra hastened to Olin.

"Stop it now," she said, peremptorily. "She is weak. She can't stand any more. She looks as if she is about to faint. It is hot in here, and I'll ask her to go out where it is cooler."

"Very well," the young man answered, approvingly. "I think you are right."

The next moment, leaning on Myra's strong arm, Jane passed out into the soothing starlight, and together they walked slowly homeward.

## CHAPTER XXV

HE next morning Myra went to the meadow to gather wild flowers. She had her hands full, and was about to return when she saw George coming toward her from his cotton-field across the road; so she paused and waited for him. It struck him that her dress was unusually becoming. She wore a neat shirt-waist cut low at the neck, a blue skirt that fitted her lithe figure perfectly, and one of the graceful, broad-brimmed hats made by the mountain women from the silky inner folds of corn husks. The pink clover blossoms in her bouquet seemed to heighten the color of her cheeks and render more pronounced the full red curves of her lips.

"I saw you when you first went out"—he was panting from his walk, and a certain restraint her presence had of late put upon him—"and I determined that I would speak to you. But if you'd rather I'd not—stop—"

"Oh, George, how can you be so cruel?" she cried, reproachfully. "You know I like to see you at any time, and now especially, for I want to inquire about your mother. How did she rest last night?"

"I am really worried about her," he returned. "I did not sleep well last night myself, for some cause

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or other—thinking of her, perhaps—and so I heard her moving about through the night. When she returned from church she seemed all wrought up by excitement. I saw it would not be good for her to talk much, so I did not ask any questions. Though I am sure something of an unusual nature must have taken place.”

In a sweet, gentle voice Myra informed him in detail of what had occurred, while tears of sympathy welled up in her eyes. He listened, his brow furrowed and drawn, as he stood with his gaze on the mountain-side, an imperceptible shudder passing through his frame.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, as if from sharp inward pain, “she did that—she went through all that?”

“Yes, George, and, feel as you may about it from your standpoint, she is all the happier. If you could have seen the way those good people gathered about her, anxious to assure her of their support and sympathy, you would have understood it better. Why didn’t you go?”

“She didn’t want me to,” he replied, in a dry, forced voice. “She said plainly that she wanted to go alone.”

“Oh! And I thought you stayed away out of opposition. I am glad you didn’t, though I don’t see why she didn’t want you there, for, George, I fancy she did it chiefly on your account.”

“I know it,” he answered, succinctly. “Myra, no one alive understands her as well as I do—no one understands her greatness as well as I do. All my life I’ve been trying to rise to her level. I know now that I never can. Don’t ask me to explain, for I

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can't. I am wholly upset. I know how she wants me to act, but I am not sure I can do as she wishes."

"You will—you will in time." Myra raised her flowers to her face and lowered her eyes till the long lashes touched her pink cheeks. He remembered, almost with thrills of incredulity, how he had held her in his arms that day during the storm when all was chaos without and all bliss within. He eyed her slender hand with awed and famished eyes as he recalled that she, of her own accord, had put it round his neck and drawn his face down and kissed him.

"Do you think so?" he said, aimlessly. Then the shadow of deep thought crossed his eyes as he finished: "You are saying it out of your own hopefulness. There are things some of us can't bring ourselves to do—not even if our very lives depended on it."

She smiled faintly, by no means convinced. "You would have said a week ago that your mother could never have done what she did last night."

"I admit that," he owned, promptly. "I did not dream of it. As well as I know her, that step was altogether out of my calculations."

"It made Olin perfectly happy," Myra went on. "He has always, since he was a little boy, liked and admired your mother."

"I know it, and it has made me like him," George said. "He is genuine. He believes what he preaches and is living up to his ideal as well as he can, everything considered."

"You will be glad to hear that he"—she broke off—"have you seen him to-day?"

"No, I don't meet him as often as I used to. He

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stays at home more with his studies, and when he comes out it is either with his mother or you, or he is dashing off to visit somebody that is sick or in trouble."

"Then, if you haven't seen him, you don't know what is about to happen," Myra pursued. "It is a sort of secret between Olin and his mother and myself, but he would want you to know, so I shall tell you. The pulpit of the First Church at Funstown is vacant. The minister has resigned to manage the big business of his father-in-law, who is a rich manufacturer, and the members are looking for a preacher to take his place. Mrs. Dwight heard of it through a friend over there, and she has written a dozen letters and forwarded a lot of testimonials. She has set her heart on having Olin get the appointment. She says she wants to live in a larger place, where there are more comforts and where the people are more advanced socially and in point of education, and she is greatly excited over the prospect. She has already had a letter from the committee who are to choose the minister, and they have promised to come here the Sunday after next to hear him preach. They don't want anything said about it, and expect to drop in during the morning service as if they just happened along casually."

"Oh, I see," George said. "I hope he will get it. Growth is everything in this life. Stagnation in any calling is death."

"But we must keep it from my father, at least till it is settled," Myra added.

"From him—why?"

Myra smiled. "You certainly know him well

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enough to know how he would take a thing like that. It would make him furious, and Mr. Lee and Mr. Strobe also. You see, they feel like they own Olin, body and soul, because they advanced the money for his education. It is their pride that they have a first-class preacher, and they don't want him to leave. But Mrs. Dwight doesn't care a fig for what they think. She wants to see her son rise in the world, and it actually makes her mad when anything is said about my father's claims. She stamped her foot in rage the other day when Olin spoke of his obligations here and his willingness to stay on. She refused to listen to him. She told him that the high salary paid by the Funstown church would soon settle the debt, and that he should be no man's slave. She declared she'd wear her fingers to the bone in taking in washing rather than have him remain a mountain preacher when he had brains enough to fill the best pulpit in the South. So you see, George, that's why we have to keep the matter quiet for a while. If he should get the appointment—and somehow I think he will, for he is very talented—then my father would be obliged to consent."

"Yes, yes." The cloud deepened on the farmer's face. "And Funstown is a good town. It will be nice for—you all."

"For us all?" Myra started. There was a leaden flow of gravity to her face. She raised her flowers and helplessly stared at him through them.

"Yes, for you, too, Myra." The words fell heavily from his lips, and he averted his eyes. His voice shook, and he steadied it by a strenuous effort as he continued: "Ever since our talk on the moun-

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tain I have seen this grim thing ahead of us. You see, I know you so well. You will have to decide between two men, both of whom adore you. As you said, he is wholly wrapped up in you. You are necessary to him. You and he are alike in belief and aspirations. I am an outsider. I admire you for what you are, but you can't like me for what I am, and I can't change myself. I was born on the outside of things, and I shall remain there. Even if you cared for me a—a little bit more than you do for him, you could not come to me, for your duty wouldn't let you. You'd never be happy after having encouraged him as you have, and your happiness is all there is in the world for me. I couldn't let you link your sunny life with my cloudy one. I have nothing to offer—absolutely nothing, while Olin has *everything*."

Her face was white and rigid; the hand grasping her flowers shook, and a tiny shower of pink and white petals fell to the ground.

"Oh, George, George!" she faltered, "don't, don't say that! Indeed, I have been awfully troubled about you and Olin. I had little idea this complication would arise. The association with you both was so bright and beautiful! I thought I could be a friend to you both, but that day on the mountain for a moment, at least, everything was swept away except you and me. As I came back to consciousness and found myself in your arms safe from that awful storm, I felt somehow as if God intended us to be that way—remain that way—and I clung to you and kissed you. Don't think I regret it, for I do not. If—if I should, in the end, marry Olin,

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I'd first tell him about that. I'd tell him, too, exactly how I feel toward you, and then if he didn't want me, I'd at least be as free as you are."

They walked along slowly. In the far distance, where the mountain links were broken, the ineffable blue of the skies seemed to fall like thin mist over the landscape. The drone of a myriad of insects filled the air, and the scent of wild flowers and new-mown hay greeted their nostrils. With his massive head hanging, he said nothing for several minutes. They had reached a clear mountain brook, and he took her hand to steady her as she stepped across the slimy, brown stones. On the other side their fingers clung together as if loath to part, and he held her hand in a throbbing clasp for a moment. Then she drew it away, for she felt his blood beating warningly into hers.

"As Olin's wife"—she took up the subject where her speech, not her thoughts, had left it—"it would be my duty to think only of him; but if he didn't want to take me with—with my heart exactly like it is, I could love you as—as I do on to the end of time—even if you were away out West and I stayed on here in the mountains. Oh, George, you have your future, too. You will succeed. You will become a great lawyer. I have my simple religious faith, but I am not so narrow as to think your way of thinking will keep you back. I have read of great men who view things as you do. But your mother hopes that you may be influenced to think otherwise by her recent step. It seems to be her chief hope now, and if you do, George"—there was



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an exquisite and anxious tremolo in her voice—"if you should, and Olin *were* to release me—"

She went no further. The white and red phalanges in her face were fighting for supremacy.

"He wouldn't—he *couldn't!*" burst from the throat of the sufferer. "No man could give you up. In Olin's place—with his *right* to you—I'd give you up to no earthly power. I'd want you if you'd loved a thousand men. I'd want you for what you are. Your doing a thing, feeling a thing, would make it right. I could ask nothing better than to be your slave, as I am already your slave, and always shall be."

She raised a pair of eyes strained by yearning to his. Her lips were drawn and twitching. "George, what did you mean by saying '*his right*' to me?"

He turned his face away. She saw the pained look upon it deepen till it was almost a grimace. "I didn't intend to say it," came reluctantly from his lips. "It is a thing I thought I should never speak of even to you. But I have faced it many and many a time. You see, as the world looks at it—your world and Olin's—I am nothing more nor less than a—but I won't talk about it. You know what I mean. I think, however, that it was my strange separation from others that drove me into the realm of dreams—made me seek in the skies the things which were denied me here. You mustn't pity me. Somehow I feel that there is in my dreams a recompense for what I have lost—or never had. And yet I am human to the core. At this moment I want you as man never wanted woman since the

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dawn of time. When I think of your going to him as his *wife*, my brain staggers—swoons under the sheer incongruity of such a thing. It would seem to me”—he laughed harshly, and his quivering lip curled in an ashen sneer—“that my claim that the universe is harmony would be a lie, for your union with him would turn it into jangling discord. But all that may be a maddening part of my dream. You have the grim facts of life to face—your people to please, your promise to keep, your religious laws to obey.”

With her hands over her face she was silently weeping.

“You make it very hard for me,” she muttered. “I am trying to do my duty before God and the world. I can’t tell you all I feel. I would, but it could not help the matter any. You drive me to plainer speech, though, by your cruel reference to your—your birth. A trifle like that is nothing—absolutely nothing. It wouldn’t make a particle of difference to me. Why should it, for I believe you are all the finer and nobler for it? It has made you what you are—different from all men on earth. No, no, it isn’t that which holds me back—it is a fear away down in me—you may call it superstition if you like—but it is a fear, and an unconquerable one, that I am undergoing trial—that I have reached a crisis in my life in which I must decide between my faith, which till now has supported me, and a thing exactly the opposite. When I am tempted to go with you, I feel a vital something passing from me; the prayers I offer up seem to go out into vacancy. But when I resolve to sacrifice my love for you and


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take my place by the side of one who has consecrated his life to—”

“I understand,” George groaned, as her words died on her lips. “We are both in the hands of Fate. You were born to be as you are and I was born to be as I am. Isn’t it queer? As much as I am convinced that I am right about what I think, if you were to come to me and say, ‘George, I’ve given it all up; I no longer believe as I did, and am now ready to follow you’—Myra, if you were to come and say that, I’d—I’d stare at you as if you were some strange person I’d never seen before. No, I want you to remain exactly as you are. I wouldn’t change a hair of your head—not one sweet, trusting thought that ever came into your brain.”

“And—and”—she put her hand to her lips as if to hold back the words—“George, I’d feel the same about you if you were to change. I wonder—I wonder what it means?”

## CHAPTER XXVI

HEN he had parted from Myra at the end of the lane George turned back to his field. As he was about to pass through the gate he saw Tom Mell riding toward him on horseback. Mell waved his hand as if he wanted to speak to him and George waited.

"I'm just from Petigree's store," the miller said, with a frown that set oddly on his jocund face, as he tugged at his beard till his lower teeth showed. "I never heard the report till I got there, but you can bet your sweet life I heard enough then."

"You mean—?"

"I mean about the way your ma done. Good Lord, boy! I had no more idea she was going to flop over like that than I am of flying to the moon on this hoss. Why, the last time I talked to her she was actually rampant against the whole caboodle of lying fools and hypocrits."

"She hasn't been well of late," George said, "and she is getting old, and if it is any comfort to her—"

"Comfort the devil!" The miller fumed in a wisp of beard which he tucked into his mouth by way of habit. "How's all that tomfoolery going to comfort anybody with her brains? Well, they think they've got us stampeded—the whole dirty bunch of 'em do."

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Chapman and the rest had the laugh on me at the store just now, and I was mad enough to bite a ten-penny nail in two. I wouldn't 'a' believed it—I'd 'a' thought it was a joke—if Petigree hadn't nodded to me on the sly while Chapman and Strobe was telling about it. According to them our official head has been chopped off, and there ain't nothing left for us to do but to pull in our horns and walk up and confess our guilt. They said I'd always claimed your ma had a big brain, and now they know it. Why, you never saw the like! Not a chap there—even them that used to meet with us and read our books—not one would say a word. It looked like your ma's act has clean upset and scared 'em out of the little common sense they had to begin with. By gum, I was so floored I couldn't speak. I reckon I looked like a plumb fool. I was standing at the big platform scales, and my hand was itching to grab a weight and let it fly into Chapman's grinning mouth. Looky here, George, this ain't no place for me and you. I've been thinking about your scheme to go West and join that firm of lawyers, and I think you are right. I may sell out and follow you. My matters are in pretty good shape, and I may have something particular to say to you before many days. I'll say this now, and that is that I am your friend as true as true can be. They may run on with their fun, but we'll show 'em what we are made of. We'll leave 'em in their rut of ignorance and go to civilization—go where folks are allowed to think free thoughts and breathe free air. But your mother—your mother, by gum—that knocks my props from under me. I passed her at the fence as I went to

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town and she nodded just like she always did, though, now I come to think of it, she *did* sorter turn off like she didn't want to talk. I reckon it was a surprise to you?"

"Yes, I wasn't looking for it," George replied, "but of course I didn't oppose it."

"No, I reckon not, and yet"—Mell slapped the white dust from his knee impatiently—"I'd 'a' had trouble holding in if I'd been on hand. I'd 'a' argued the point with her and begged her to consider our feelings and the plight it puts us in. Well, I'm not mending the matter by standing here. I'll ride on. There is no use crying over spilt milk. Your ma's a woman, and I've heard men say they don't reason over things. I reckon she just got sorter blue in the fight she was making, and decided to flop over where she'd have more company. Then, again, she may 'a' got scared. Folks do at her time o' life."

The return of Jane Dawson to the faith of her fathers was a matter of moment to another besides the miller. Silas Dwight had not attended meeting that night, and was seated alone on his veranda when the people began to filter past the gate on their way home. From the first group, consisting of a man and two women, he heard a shrill feminine voice say, quite distinctly:

"I was astounded when she came in at the door. If I hadn't been right at her, I'd 'a' believed it was anybody but Jane Dawson. And when she walked clean up to the front and took a seat before the altar you could have knocked me down with a feather."

"I knew she had something on her mind the minute Olin went and shook hands with her," the

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other woman joined in. "I knew she was going to talk."

"Talk!" The group had melted away in the moonlight, leaving that single word to sear itself into the brain of the bewildered listener. "Talk!" Jane Dawson had gone there to tell it all to the people and to God. Her burning malice and lifelong sense of wrong had reached its limit of endurance. She had gone, smarting under the scourge of ostracism and antagonism, to publicly denounce the author of her woe — to charge it upon the father of the adored preacher.

Down the road toward the church a couple was advancing through the haze of moonlight. It was his wife and son. They must not see him now. He must have time to collect his thoughts and prepare for his public defense, denial, or—the hand of death seemed to clutch his vital parts and crush them—open confession. And, he told himself, as his terror beat wildly against the pitiless moonbeams, that there would be nothing else to do but to confess. His wife had known, of course, but till now she had restrained her wrath because of the exposure against which she had fought as for her life. But now under the public shame of it she would turn him from his own door.

His wife and son had not yet reached the gate, and Silas was still out of their view. Pulling himself together, he glided into the dark hallway behind him and crept on tiptoe back to the sitting-room. Here a lamp, that had been turned low, gave forth a sickly light; but he did not stop in the room, for it would be there or on the veranda that his wife and son would seat themselves. So into the dark

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kitchen adjoining the sitting-room his thief-like tread bore him. The outer door was open, and he felt that at the slightest warning of their close approach he could noiselessly escape on the thick turf which grew close to the stoop.

The metallic click of the gate-latch told him they were in the yard. Then he heard the crunching of their uniform tread on the gravel of the walk—nearer and nearer. They were not speaking, and that in itself was ominous. Their feet thundered on the steps and the floor of the veranda. He heard the sliding of chairs, and knew that they had seated themselves there. Two alternatives lay before the eavesdropper: he could risk the dim light of the sitting-room, from which he could catch their words, or he could creep around to the corner of the house to a point that would be quite as close. He decided on the latter course, and soon found himself ensconced behind a short, thick hedge of rose-bushes at the latticed end of the veranda. Olin was speaking:

“Yes, Mira had given me a hint that something of the sort might be expected; but I had no idea it would come so soon. However, when I saw the two entering together, and caught Myra’s confident smile, I knew it was coming. Mother, I’ve had glorious spiritual experiences, but that lifted me higher than I ever was in my life. Why, think of it—just think of it! For years and years the poor woman has borne that burden—since she was a girl the awful cancer has been eating into her soul. Every day for all those years she has been fighting God and His hosts, only to give in at last and admit



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that she was conquered. I tried to calm myself, but I choked up and my eyes filled. I was happy at the big meeting when so many came forward; but the winning of that one poor old soul to-night seemed more of a victory than all the rest. I wondered over your indifference, though. Somehow I felt that you were not moved as deeply as I expected you to be."

"I've seen so many," Silas heard his wife replying, in the complacent tones he knew so well—"so many who come forward and make new resolves, that I thought perhaps this woman might—"

"Oh, mother, how can you look at it that way?" the minister cried out, reproachfully. "This is no ordinary case. She looks to me like she is not well. It may be that she sees death ahead and wants to make all the amends in her power while it is time. I know her conviction is deep and lasting. If I were not positive of it I'd doubt the whole glorious plan of salvation."

Silas could almost see the shrug of his wife's shoulders in the slight pause that ensued, but he couldn't have dreamed of what she would say.

"There is no use, Olin," were the words which filtered through the dewy vines and leaves, "in believing that everybody is sincere simply because you *want* them so. Humph!"

"Mother, what do you mean?" Silas knew from the creaking of a chair that Olin had leaned nearer to his mother. "What *can* you mean? You've done nothing but throw cold water on this thing since it happened. The whole congregation, young and old, was moved to tears of pity and forgiveness,

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and yet you—you—well, I simply can't make you out—that's all. I thought you'd be happy over it, and yet you—you are as cold as ice."

There was another pause. Silas could hear his wife rocking back and forth through the non-committal atmosphere about her.

"In the first place"—here the heart of the eaves-dropper bounded, and then sank into the ooze of despair—"you said back there on the road that in her talk to you she didn't tell the name of the man who ruined her, and she didn't publicly. You see she is holding something back. You may call a thing like that a *complete* confession, but it isn't. She owes it to the world and her miserable son to tell the entire truth, but she won't. She will take it to her grave. My own opinion is that she would be ashamed to have it known that she ever trusted such a contemptible scamp. He is no doubt such a low-down outcast that she'd rather her son had no name at all than to bear his. The church has already been used too much by people who want to accomplish selfish purposes, and I am against it. I may as well say what I think. I don't believe Jane Dawson has one bit of sincere repentance. I'm no fool, and I read her face to-night. She knows I understand her. She didn't dare look me in the eye. As for her purpose, I know what it is. She has found that she can gain nothing by fighting our religion, and she intends to reinstate herself and have everybody make a fuss over her. It is a sly trick; but it won't work. Folks will see through it. If she had come up and told the whole shameful tale, including the name of her companion in sin,

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then it would have been different; but she didn't, and she won't."

"Oh, mother, mother!" Olin cried out; "it makes me sad to hear you say such things, and I refuse to believe them. It is noble of her not to drag into her confession the name of a man who may be dead by this time and already judged by a Power higher than—"

"Dead! He's not dead! He's alive! He walks the earth with his head in the air, and—coward that he is—he leaves her to bear both his shame and hers. But he, too, is on his way to public confession. She knows it, and is biding her time. By this step to-night she means to hurry him on. You needn't tell me Jane Dawson is humbled." And Sarah Dwight's voice rose and cracked in a burst of passion. "She's a devil in human shape. She hates me; she hates you. She's taken a new tack, that's all. We'll hear from her. This is just her first move. I don't profess to know what she will do; but she will do something. She will act. She is coiling like a dying snake, and she will strike."

"Oh, mother, you actually frighten me!" the minister cried in real alarm. "I have never heard you speak like this before. I am going to pray for you—pray that you may have your heart softened. It seems to me, now, as I look back on the past, that you have never treated that poor woman quite humanely. Is it possible that it is contrary to the nature of women to overlook *that particular* offense? I have heard it said that the more virtuous a woman is the more she despises the lack of it

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in another. But you remember what our Saviour said—”

“Don’t say any more about it, Olin!” Mrs. Dwight cried out, stamping the floor with her foot. “I’m nervous; it has wrought me all up. I feel like screaming. Go away and leave me alone—now—now, I tell you!”

“Very well, mother,” Olin answered. “I shall go to my room. Shall we omit family prayer to-night?”

“Yes, yes, to-night,” was the answer.

Silas heard his son going along the corridor to his room, and then he heard something else that startled him. It was his wife coming down the veranda steps. The next moment she was turning the corner. Silas shrank back against the hedge, now alarmed lest he be discovered. The next moment his wife was facing him. She stood quite close and spoke with a rasping whisper.


“I knew you were here. I would have said more for your ears if I’d dared, but you know what I think—you know no words could express my contempt. Jane Dawson intends to force you to come forward and tell the truth, and in that way humiliate me and Olin. That’s her plan, and, when George Dawson finds out the whole thing, do you know what he’ll do? He’d settle with you. Jane wouldn’t care what he did. She’s bent on getting even while there is life in her bones. She’d see her own son on the scaffold to gain her point.”

Like a reptile erect and hissing, the woman moved away on the grass. Silas stood till she had disappeared round the corner, then his limbs gave way beneath him and he sank to the ground. He threw

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his head back into the foliage of the hedge, uttered a soundless groan, and became conscious of but one thing—that he was praying for self-obliteration, appealing for mercy to the pitiless force which was closing about him like a palpable substance.

## CHAPTER XXVII

ESPITE the effort of Olin and his mother to prevent his followers from hearing of the intentions of the First Church of Funstown, the fact leaked out and became food for excited gossip in the village. Tom Mell chewed it like a delightful cud for an hour over his work after he had got the report straight from headquarters, and finally put down his tools and rode to the store, hoping that he would be the first to start its circulation. He was in time; he was sure of that fact as he neared Petigree's store and saw "the three wise men" in complacent confab on the little porch.

"They wouldn't grin like that if they was on," he chuckled, as he hitched his horse at the rack and, all covered with white dust, even to his beard and eyebrows, ascended the steps to where they stood. He decided that it was in his favor that Chapman should greet him with a preliminary taunt and that his two allies should echo it with sly chuckles of satisfaction.

"How is yore august gang getting along since the only brains in it come over to the enemy?" Chapman inquired, the pipe-stem in his mouth shaking merrily and threatening to fall.

"Have to put up with it," Mell answered, dryly, as he winked at Petigree, who stood leaning in the

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doorway. "Have to make the best of it, as you fellows will when your brag preacher goes where folks ain't so stingy and will pay living wages. Didn't know you was going to lose him, did you?"

"Lose him?" And Chapman grinned confidently at Lee and Strobe, and refilled his pipe from tobacco in his big pants pocket. "Boys, he's heard about the sermon Olin preached at Ringgold, and thinks that we— Say, Tom, go off and study up some'n else. You think we ain't posted. Olin come to me and asked me about that trip, and I told him to go ahead. By gum, I want folks round about to know what we've got. There isn't any fun in having good judgment if nobody finds it out. And they did find it out. They packed the house so full that the walls bulged out—the other churches closed up, and the preachers went to learn how the trick was done."

"I wasn't thinking about Ringgold." Mell drove it at them. "It was some'n else a sight different from that. I see you ain't on. Well, you will know in due time. Say, Petigree"—glancing into the store—"yore stack of Lily White is low. Le' me send you twenty halves and forty quarters. You'll need 'em."

Petigree nodded his consent, and in the puzzled silence on the part of the entire group Mell took out his note-book and calmly wrote down the order. "Need any shorts, or bran?" he asked the store-keeper, as his glance of sly amusement swept the perplexed countenances of the "three wise men."

"I reckon not, Tom." Petigree was conscious of being more interested in gossip than business, and

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he leaned forward hoping that for the nonce details as to his stock would be omitted.

"What is it, Tom?" he asked. "What is it about Olin. Anything new?"

"Seems to be new to his chief backers," Mell mumbled, his nose in his book, the tip of his pencil in his mouth. "But a thing like that *ought* to be worked on the quiet. Sister Dwight is a good business woman. I'll give her credit for being a better manager than any *three men* I ever run across. She don't set around the front of a store bragging and making cracks at everybody that passes along. She looks ahead, takes deliberate aim at a thing, and she shoots, but with noiseless powder. There is to be some high didoes cut in the sacred camp—the world, flesh, and the devil is going to wrangle, if I'm any prophet. The good Lord don't send circuses to sanctimonious quarters like this, but He furnishes fun that is a sight better."

"Say, you don't know what you are talking about." Chapman was driven to anger by sheer curiosity. He knew Mell's methods of procedure in such oral contests as the present, and he could not remember that the miller ever had thrown out a false scent.

"Well, I don't mind telling you," Mell smiled. "The big new church at Funstown is going to be empty on the first of December. I'm speaking of the one with the fine organ and the Fifth Avenue parsonage attached."

"I knew that," Chapman sniffed. "It's general talk. They've got their eye on the Rev. Simon Paul Beeks, of Macon, who conducted their revi-



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val last summer. I'm told they've offered a whacking big figure."

"They *did* have their eye on Beeks," Mell admitted, the effulgence of his face and eyes much in evidence, "but they say he's too old. What they want—you see they are like you fellows—what they are willing to put their money into is a young chap just starting out. But from all accounts they will not have such slack methods as you three had. They will hire a lawyer, and draw up documents that will hold in case anybody else gets to bidding against 'em. But they are a big-moneyed lot, and they can make the figures interesting from the jump. The pay they offer is mighty nigh as big as a congressman gets, and the rent of a bang-up city mansion goes in to boot."

"And you mean to—to say that Olin and his mammy are running after that job?" Chapman was white in the face and quite pliant in the hands of the wily miller.

"No; oh no, they ain't running after it." Mell smiled, and little jerks of merriment shook the powder from his clothes. "Preachers never run after plumbs like that. They jest lie quiet under the tree and let the Lord shake 'em down. But I don't want to be misunderstood. I ain't the sort to do any man injustice. Olin Dwight ain't out after big stakes, nor high worldly honors; if I do say it, he is a credit to your whole measley lay-out. His mammy is the queen bee. You can look at her with your eyes shut and know she was born for higher things than can be had in this mossback community. Old Silas never helped her rise in so-

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ciety, and the old lady saw her chance in her boy. She saw it early and trained him for the job. She used you chaps to a purty good purpose, and if she can get this place for Olin she will pay you back your money and say, 'Ah revoir, gentlemen, I'll meet you when the cows come home.'"

"Then she hain't actually *got* it," Petigree gasped, in the excitement which embraced him like the folds of a boa-constrictor.

"Well, no, the contract ain't, to say, actually signed," Mell answered, "but, knowing her as I do, and how easy she's managed *these fellows*, I'd bet all I own that she will land the job high and dry. Olin is now at work on the sermon, and the committee that is to pick a man is to slide in here Sunday morning on the quiet and hear it. It is going to be a great day, and I've ordered me a shirt washed. I wouldn't miss it for any price. I expect to hear these three chaps yell amen at every line he preaches."

"Humph!" The exclamation was Chapman's. His concern was too deep for anger. He stared mutely into the baffled faces of Lee and Strobe. His own statement that their preacher could "walk the log of any minister in America" now rose like a mountain between him and his hopes. With a laugh of grim satisfaction, Mell turned into the store and was followed by the agitated Petigree.

"Boys, what is to be done?" It was significant that it was the first time in the memory of Lee and Strobe that their leader had appealed to them.

"The Lord only knows," Lee all but groaned. "If it was just Olin he'd stick to us all right; but

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Sister Dwight has been getting worse and worse ever since he come home from school. She's had a stiff strut on her, and a high and mighty look for some time. She can manage Olin, I reckon; and if the committee decides on him, why, I guess we'll have to draw in our horns. As Mell says, we didn't have the forethought to make Olin sign an agreement, and—"

"Agreement or no agreement," Chapman snorted, "he can't wipe his feet on me; nor she can't either."

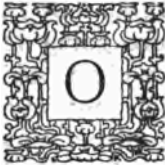
"Say, I was just wondering," Strobe ventured, with a tentative look at his superior, which glanced off into vacancy, "if you will excuse me for mentioning such a thing—I was wondering if Myra's influence with Olin might not—you see, Brother Chapman, the boy thinks a power of her, and I'll bet my hat if she was to say that she'd rather—"

"Humph!" Chapman's choler had risen to the exploding point, and he threw himself back against the weather-boarding with a resounding bump. "His mammy's got to sticking her finger in that pie, too. The other day she called me to the fence and said she wanted a private word with me. She beat about the bush considerable, but finally come out and wanted to know, as nigh as I could come at it, how much I was going to set aside for Myra in case her and Olin couldn't be kept apart. It made me mad, but I told her what my effects consisted of, and that—being of long-lived stock on both sides—I didn't have any ready funds to set apart at all. I told her I had always held that a man ought to be able to take care of his wife, provided none of *his own kin* was saddled onto him.

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I reckon that remark hit her in a weak spot, for she flared up and said that Olin couldn't get along without her, and, as far as she was concerned, she believed that it was the custom these days for brainy young preachers to marry in rich families, like so many are doing. Of course, I didn't want to stand there like an auctioneer trying to sell my own flesh and blood, and so I didn't argue. Boys, there are no two ways about it, we are going to have trouble with that woman. But we must hold in and wait. Olin may not get the job, anyway. We think he's purty good, but that committee may not like his preaching at all, and we must try not to look anxious."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

N the following Sunday the weather, for the middle of July, was crisp and cool. Olin, who had penetrated only that part of his mother's designs which pertained to his actual happiness, had risen with much hope. The evening before, in the lamplight of the sitting-room, he had half read, half declaimed to her the sermon he had written, and seen by her face and manner that it met with her full approval. He found his outer clothing and spotless linen ready for him; and, when he had taken his bath and dressed, he joined his mother in the dining-room, where a delicious breakfast of tender fried chicken, hot biscuits, and coffee were awaiting him.

"I had a good night's sleep," she informed him, when he had given her his usual morning kiss, "and I feel splendid this morning. Somehow, I am sure we are going to win to-day. What do you think—I've read your sermon over again. I wanted to be sure that there was not a single thing in it that any one could take exception to. I've marked out one little item. In one place you spoke a little too plainly, it struck me, about an actual hell of eternal punishment—"

"But, mother," he protested, mildly, "I think I

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only quoted from the Bible, and you know it says plainly that—”

“Yes, yes”—she was filling his cup with coffee—“I know—I understand all that, my son, and, of course, people can believe it literally or not as they see fit. I’ve made some inquiries about the members of the church at Funstown. Mrs. Sneed used to live there, you know, and she told me that one or two of the committee were inclined to be, as she put it, up to date in regard to some of the old beliefs. There is no harm in a minister believing the Scriptures word for word, and preaching the *spirit* of it, you know, but he must not stand in his own light by openly offending those who can advance his interests. Mrs. Sneed understands the situation, and she said you must be very careful not to go against your congregation. For one thing, she warned me against letting you come down too hard on dancing and harmless games of cards. The Funstown church used to be very rigid, but here lately, since the town is larger and more city-like, it is not so much so.”

“Oh, móther, I am afraid I am not exactly the man they are looking for,” the minister sighed, in his cup. “I want to please you and rise as high in my work as I can; but I must be free to deal with the abuses of life. I can move people here in the mountains, because I can say right out what I believe; but if I have to stop and consider who the truth is going to hurt, why—”

“Don’t bother about that,” Mrs. Dwight said, firmly. “Don’t cross bridges till we get to them. The sermon is all right now. Put your heart into it. Don’t be afraid of these men. Remember what

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an impression you made at Ringgold. Why, I never saw such enthusiasm. An old lady—one of the old slaveholding aristocrats—came up to me after it was over, and with tears in her eyes she kissed me and congratulated me on having a son I could be so proud of; and lots and lots of others said the same thing. Oh, it is glorious! And think of it—you are giving me the only happiness I ever had. That ought to satisfy you, for what better could a son do than make the last days of his mother happy? Now finish your breakfast and run over your sermon again.”

“Where is father?” Olin asked, looking through the open window to the lawn.

“He had his breakfast an hour ago,” was the indifferent answer. “He hasn’t shaved, nor dressed. He won’t be at church. There is no use worrying about him—he is one of our trials. If we go to Funstown, he would be even more out of place there. In fact, I am satisfied that he will want to stay here on the farm most of the time. If he does, I hope folks won’t talk about it. He is queer, and we can’t make him any other way.”

“I suppose so,” Olin said, absently, for he was thinking of some one else. “Mother, shall we stop by after Myra this morning?”

Mrs. Dwight seemed to hesitate. She reached for the cream-jug and poured some cream into her coffee, after which she deliberately put in a spoonful of sugar.

“Do you think we ought to?” she parried, as she quietly stirred her coffee.

“Why, I didn’t know but what she might expect it. She is very much interested in the outcome of this thing.”

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"Of course." Mrs. Dwight sipped, and one of her rare flushes crept into her cheeks. "Of course, she naturally would be interested, but—and that's another thing, Olin, which it would be wise to consider just now. You say she has not yet given you a positive answer, and, of course, until she does—"

"Until she does? Mother, what do you mean?"

"Why"—the maternal countenance was losing its color; a grim, bloodless purpose lay in rigid lines about the autocratic mouth—"why, you see—silly as it may seem—nearly all fashionable congregations prefer unmarried ministers, especially if they are young and handsome. If Myra had fully decided, that would be a different matter; but, as she hasn't, I simply would not like for it to be circulated at Funstown that you were—were, well, quite so much in love with a girl who is deliberating over accepting you. It wouldn't be fair to you"—the speaker's resentment was rising against her will—"to have the report get out that you are bent on marrying a simple country girl who doesn't know her own mind, and whose father hasn't a penny to give her. I resent it. I can't help it. I'm just a natural mother, and I resent the insult to me and you, too. Poof! the parsonage at Funstown is one of the finest houses in the town, and the woman who presides over it ought to be a lady of tact and accustomed to the ways of the best society. Myra is a nice, sweet girl, and pretty enough, in a way, but I should think you would stop and consider—"

"Oh, mother," the young man groaned, "what do you mean?"



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Mrs. Dwight had gone too far to further mince matters.

"I mean this," she blurted out. "You won't agree with me, for you would rather die than think she could be like any other natural girl who wants to feather her nest. She has held you off till now for no real reason, and if you do get this beautiful appointment, and she then decides to marry you—well, you can see what people would think. You might try to close your eyes to the fact, but it would still remain for you to face the rest of your life."

"Mother, you are absolutely unfair." With that he laughed spontaneously, and his brow cleared. "You are jealous—you are simply jealous, and I am not going to listen to another word."

"Well, you may call it that," the woman returned, more mildly. "At any rate, I shall not say any more about it till you preach that sermon. Everything depends on it—everything. Now, go take a walk. You always preach better after exercise. Go up the mountain road. Don't go by Chapman's. He's heard about those men coming, and he may flare up and say something unpleasant. Don't have any words with him if you possibly can avoid it. It would upset you and affect your delivery."

A half-hour later, when he returned, he found his mother in the kitchen giving instructions to Dina, the colored cook. The aroma of baking meats and highly spiced pies and cakes greeted his nostrils, and many jars and tins of fruit preserves and rich-looking jellies were displayed. The door of the range was open, and he saw a big fat turkey browning on the rack.

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"Why, what's all this?" he exclaimed, as he paused in the doorway.

His mother smiled knowingly and drew him into the dining-room. "That's my end of it," she laughed. "Dina and I were at work all day yesterday, and you didn't notice us. She laughed over it like she'd split her sides. The truth is, I am going to have those gentlemen here to dinner. They intend, of course, to go to the hotel, for they couldn't start back till the cool of the afternoon. There is nothing that will impress people like—like giving them nice things to eat. I'll show them that we're *somebody*, if we *do* live in the mountains."

"Well, you *are* a general!" He laughed, and touched her playfully under the chin. "You will get the appointment for me if it is to be had."

They had passed out into the front hall, and were at the open door of the company-room.

"I've fixed it up as clean as a pin," she said. "They will want some place to wash their hands and faces. I've hung fresh curtains, and put flowers in the vases, and evergreen in the fireplace. Dina whitewashed the hearth. Don't disturb the *Ringgold Times* on the table. It is folded at the account of your sermon and the list of persons at the reception."

"Mother, you are actually silly!" he admonished her, with a laugh.

"Silly or not," she retorted, "the paper stays right where it is, and I'm going to keep dinner waiting long enough to give them time to read it. Mrs. Sneed says we needn't count on having them render a decision while they are here. They will go back to Funstown, and write a formal letter from there."

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"They may not decide in our favor," he said, gloomily. "Mother, you are counting our chickens before they are hatched."

"Yes, maybe." A cloud gathered on her smooth brow. "I know it is not certain, but I want it so much that I haven't dared think of failure. If we were to lose, I am afraid I could not stand the disappointment."

He had stepped into the room and was looking about admiringly, when his attention was drawn to the snowy wash-stand, with its big porcelain pitcher and bowl and abundance of towels. Beside the basin stood some goblets and a decanter full of a bright-brown fluid.

"Why, what is this?" He was advancing toward it when Mrs. Dwight caught his arm and drew him back.

"Let it alone," she said, a flush on her face, a twinkle of mischief in her eyes. "It is some fine old rye whiskey your grandfather had. I've kept it for medicinal use and for snake-bites."

"But—but you won't let it stay here where they may see it?" he began. "Why, mother, have you lost your senses?"

She bit her lip and drew him back to the hall. "Leave it alone." She was evidently vexed at his discovery, and was silent for a moment; then she said, doggedly: "I asked Mrs. Sneed all about those men. She knows them well. She says they drink a little when they are off on a trip like this, and have a good time. She said if they went to the hotel they would order what they want, and that it would not be out of place here. Your grandfather used always to give it to visiting preachers.

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You see, I am not *offering* it to them. It is just to be there handy, and they can take it or leave it. Mrs. Sneed says the leading men in Funstown are not as narrow on such things as we are here, and if we expect to get on with them we must not rub them the wrong way. I want them to have a good time under our roof, and not feel like they are in the backwoods away off from the comforts they have been accustomed to. Mrs. Sneed says they all smoke, and I bought some of the best cigars Petigree had—some he said was too high for any but the drummers that come along. I'll have Dina pass them just after they have their coffee. They will see that we are up to snuff, and they will like it. You see if they don't. Now, you go away and attend to your end of the business. After all, everything depends on the way you deliver that sermon. You watch me now and then. If I have my hands clasped, I will mean that you'd better speak louder. Above all, don't get scared out of your wits if Brother Chapman looks mad or makes threats. But he really is the only one I'm worrying about now. I'm afraid he may say something or do something unpleasant."

"Do you think he will openly oppose my going?" Olin stared anxiously.

"I don't know as I'd care if he did, if he went about it in a decent sort of way." Mrs. Dwight smiled. "Nothing is so good in a case like this as to make folks see you are in demand. Besides, I've already let them know that there will be strong opposition here. Now, go on. I've got lots and lots to do."

## CHAPTER XXIX



AS Olin and his mother drew near the church an hour later, she called his attention to the vast number of horses and vehicles under the trees and scattered about on the grass of the common.

"The house will be packed and jammed," she chuckled. "It couldn't be better. That's the Simpson family carriage at the spring. They have driven twenty miles this morning, and they are as well-off as any family at Funstown. Aha! that settles it! There comes our committee!"

An open landau drawn by a sleek pair of bays, and driven by a negro in a battered silk top-hat, had turned the corner and was slowing up at the church door. Its inmates were a tall, middle-aged gentleman, with a full black beard and a courtly bearing; another man of stocky build, iron-gray hair and mutton-chop whiskers, and clean-shaven upper lip; and a third, a younger man than either of his companions. This last had a blond mustache, and was stylishly dressed, even to kid gloves, a natty straw hat, and cane. He was the first to alight from the carriage, and stood giving orders to the driver.

"That's young Calvin Brinsley," Mrs. Dwight explained. "Mrs. Sneed says he's a sort of dare-devil when he takes a notion. His father donated the

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church, you know. That is his turnout and driver. Calvin has a pretty sister, Martha, who they say will come into a lot of money. She is an active member of the church, and leads the young ladies' Bible class. She is a very, very fine girl and quite literary. They live next door to the parsonage, in a fine old house with colonial columns in front and summer-houses on the lawn."

"Who is the tall, dark man?" Olin inquired.

"Colonel Wynship Dyer, the banker," was the response. "The other is Dr. William Warren. They are all influential. But we needn't be afraid of them. They are already impressed in your favor, or they wouldn't come so far to hear you preach. Now, hold your own—just hold your own."

The distinguished visitors were seated in the rear of the church when Olin and his mother entered, but neither she nor he glanced in their direction. From his elevation in the pulpit, Olin surveyed the congregation. It was a sea of waving fans and fluttering hat-ribbons, in which floated familiar faces from which came kind glances in his direction. He saw Myra, and a moment later he caught her eye. She smiled and gently inclined her head toward the committee. Beside her sat her mother, and farther on her father. It was Chapman's face which riveted the young minister's attention, for there was no mistaking the character of the sinister expression which brooded over it. Chapman was angry, and made no effort to hide the fact. Behind him sat Lee and Strobe, their grim countenances sternly reflecting their leader's discontent. Near a window, almost in the full glare of hot sunshine, sat an

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individual of whom many dire and supernatural things had been predicted. Tom Mell had long been consigned to eternal flames, and, for a man with such a future before him, he certainly wore a queer facial expression. His eyes were fairly bubbling with delight as they played first upon Chapman and his two intimates, and then upon the dignified strangers farther back in the church.

The minister, however, soon forgot to notice these things. The main cause of the successful delivery of his sermons was his absorption in whatever subject he had in hand, and this morning, as he stood and read his text, he became conscious of speaking to the ears of only one person in the room. He fixed his eyes on Myra's reverent face, reading in it her approval, her sympathy, her stirred emotions. He had never acquitted himself better. His mother knew it; Chapman knew it; Tom Mell's ebullient joy testified to it; the committee in the rear were evidently agreeably surprised, and the Fox sisters quite close to the altar were weeping aloud.

On all former occasions Chapman had waited after service to speak to the minister, but to-day he marshaled his family and Lee and Strobe straight down the aisle and out at the door. Mrs. Dwight was waiting for her son as he came from the pulpit.

"It was all right," she smiled. "Couldn't have been better. I'm glad you didn't rant too much. I was watching them. They were delighted. I saw them nudging one another and winking and nodding all through the sermon. Come on. Don't let the Fox women stop you. The gentlemen are waiting at the door, and we must invite them to dinner."

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The crowd had thinned out when they reached the front where the three visitors stood waiting. It was the courtly Colonel Wynship who stepped forward, his hat in hand, and introduced himself.

"I'm sure many suspect what our business is out here to-day," he said, with a smile, as he shook hands with them both. "Your fame is getting widespread, Mr. Dwight."

Olin smiled and expressed his appreciation, and introduced his mother, who became a very embodiment of gracious tact as she shook hands with the other gentlemen. She had seen Tobe Sebastian, the hotel-keeper, waiting at the landau, and surmised that he intended to solicit the patronage of the visitors, and so she at once extended her invitation.

"We certainly won't let that chance go by," young Brinsley thrust in promptly. "We were going to the hotel, but I am dying for a real old-fashioned home dinner in somebody's house."

The others accepted just as Sebastian stepped forward and timidly introduced himself.

"Too late—too late, old man," Brinsley laughed. "No hotel fare for us. We've heard about the way these people live over here in God's country, and we want to sample it while we've got a chance."

"Then you must let us drive you home," Doctor Warren suggested. "We can easily make room in the carriage."

"Yes, I'll sit with Pomp in front," Brinsley cried. "I've done it before."

It was what Mrs. Dwight had evidently counted on, and they were soon bowling cheerily along the road toward her house. If she had counted on



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overtaking and passing Chapman and his group, she failed to show it in her demeanor. Indeed, she barely nodded to them as the carriage trundled by. She leaned back against the soft cushions quite as if the vehicle had been her own, and barely raised her lashes in recognition. Olin, however, allowed his gaze to bear down with more than usual concern on Myra, who bowed and flushed consciously and looked at the ground. As for Chapman, his greeting was an obvious frown and shrug, and a growl that was almost audible.

Arriving at home, the visitors were at once shown to the company-room, and Mrs. Dwight went to order dinner. A window of the room opened on the front veranda, and Olin, who had taken a seat near the door to rest, soon saw wisps of cigar smoke floating out upon the lawn. Later he heard the soft clinking of glasses and merry jests and much good-natured repartee.

"Isn't this tiptop?" he heard Brinsley say. "I'd like to do this every day in the year. Say, Colonel, you didn't ask the blessing over that first one. By George, gentlemen, I've been about some; I've seen the best towns in the country, and been with men who go the gaits, but I've never yet tasted smoother stuff than this. Where under the sun do you suppose she got it? I'll bet it's a thousand years old. It seems to ooze through the very pores of the skin like the elixir of life."

The two older men seemed to be discussing the minister, and their words did not reach the veranda, but Brinsley's interpolations were unmistakable.

"I was the first that heard of him," he was saying;

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"I want that to be remembered." Olin now determined to leave the veranda, and yet was afraid his movement might be noticed. "I told you about him, Colonel, you know I did, fully two months ago. No, just one more—just two fingers. I give you my honor I don't feel it. That was a small one I took at the spring. You don't know me. I'm not a tenderfoot. Gentlemen, here's looking at you. I hate to go it alone, but you make me. Human beings that can sit and look at the color of that stuff and not take pity on it are out of my class—yes, sir, clean out of it."

Olin now saw that his mother was approaching from the open door of the dining-room. She smiled as she heard the voices in the bedroom, and there was a triumphant glow on her face as she bent over him.

"They are having a good time," she chuckled. "I smell tobacco and—something else. Dinner is ready. I suppose I might as well call them. Your father has slipped away. I thought he would; and it won't make any difference. Shall I ask them out now?"

"I think you'd better," Olin said, with a frown. "Young Brinsley seems to be getting rather lively."

"I am sure he is on our side," was the thoughtful answer; "that is, if they are not all of one opinion. But we must not count on it for sure yet."

He said nothing, and she went to the door and rapped, and when it was opened she invited her guests out to dinner.

"Allow me." It was the loquacious Brinsley who stepped ahead of his more dignified com-

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panions and offered his arm, with a gallant bow. With a pleased smile, and noting his flushed face, she took it, and they led the others to the big, cool dining-room.

"My! isn't this scrumptious!" her escort cried. He drew her chair out, and stood rubbing his hands together in delight as his eyes roved over the table. "I've heard my father tell about spreads like this in his young days."

When they were all seated, Mrs. Dwight invited Doctor Warren to say grace, and he did so with dignity and ease. Mrs. Dwight conducted the conversation with no little skill and diplomacy. She led the doctor to the subject of his profession, and spoke of the many cures she had heard of his making. To the banker she said she had read an account of the convention of bank presidents which had recently met in Atlanta, and noted what was said of the fine speech he had made.

"I am surprised to see a lady so well informed on business topics," the pleased financier responded.

"Oh, we have to read everything out here to pass the time," she declared.

"When you get settled at Funstown," Brinsley said, over his turkey—and the impropriety of the remark was a shock to the calmer senses of the others, "you will get all sorts of reading-matter at our new library."

Mrs. Dwight smiled diplomatically. "You know," she said, "that we do not know yet where we shall live. Of course, we sha'n't stay here. I have relatives in Virginia, and I thought that we might go there after a while."

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"No Virginia for you." Brinsley plunged more deeply into forbidden waters. "No, madam, Georgia brains must stay in Georgia—you bet, in Georgia. Am I right, Colonel?"

"There are some very fine people in Virginia." The man addressed used his napkin freely, as if to denude his face of its evasive tendency. "In fact, nearly half of the inhabitants of this section came either from the Carolinas or Virginia. My own family, on both sides, sprang from Chesterfield County in Virginia."

"Really?" Mrs. Dwight came to his assistance as she offered him some of her peach jelly. "My mother was a Corbin."

"Then we may be related," the banker breathed, in relief, as he noted that the disturber of the peace was absorbed in the platter of fried chicken which Aunt Dina was offering at his elbow. "I think that name is on my family-tree."

Nothing else happened to disturb the harmony of the meal, and it passed quite successfully. After it was over the gentlemen indulged in more cigars on the veranda, and Brinsley, under one pretext or another, made frequent visits to the guest-room, returning always with his handkerchief to his blond mustache and clearing his throat. He was increasingly talkative, full of admiration for the scenery, and warm in his praise of the delightful simplicity of country life. It must have been his condition that hastened the departure of the party, for Colonel Dyer had ordered the landau, and Pomp sat lashing the tips of the palings of the front fence with his long whip.

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They had made their parting speeches at the steps and gone to the carriage, leaving Olin and his mother on the veranda, when Brinsley came back up the walk with an uncertain step. He said he had left a box of matches in the guest-room, and went in after it. He must have had trouble finding it. Olin was on the point of going to his assistance, but his mother wisely checked him.

"Let him alone," she whispered. "He will be out in a minute. I didn't think he would take as much as he has, but the drive through the air will straighten him out. Anyway, he is our friend, and he has great influence."

The truth of her assertion as to the young man's good will was proven in a moment. Brinsley came out mopping his mustache. He clung to their hands for a moment.

"You are b-b-both the right sort," he stuttered. "You've treated us like white folks, and we've got to have you over our way. When you are installed in that parsonage, Mrs. Dwight, I want you to bring along that cook of yours. She's a corker. Her biscuits melt in your mouth. Those old duffers in the carriage are not the kind that talk much. They want to go through a lot of red tape in this business, but"—here he took a fresh hold of Olin's hand—"you take a tip from me, parson—the job is yours; we've salted it down in your name. While we were in that room smoking and—smoking together, we voted you in. You needn't tell 'em I let the cat out of the bag, but you will be notified all right."

He shook hands profusely again, cast a wavering glance at the door of the guest-room, and with un-

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certain step went down the walk to his companions.

When the carriage had driven off, Mrs. Dwight sank into a rocking-chair and locked her hands in her lap.

"Oh, isn't it glorious!" she cried. "I've waited for it so long—so very long—and now it has come."

Olin said nothing. He turned to the vine-covered lattice at the end of the veranda and stood looking off toward the church, the cone-shaped spire of which rose above the tree-tops. His mother watched him for a moment from beneath her brows, and then asked:

"What is the matter?"

"I'm sorry the thing has offended Brother Chapman," he sighed. "He showed that he was angry this morning during the service and as we passed him on the way home."

The beams on the woman's face were unmistakable. She clasped her hands and rubbed them together unctuously.

"Yes, the old man was good and hot, wasn't he? I was watching him. If he prayed at all to-day, he prayed that you'd preach a poor sermon. The more the committee liked it, the madder he got. He could hardly sit still. I thought once that he was going to interrupt you by some pretext or other. It would have been like him to ask you to cut the sermon out and transact church business. If he had thought of it, he would. He thinks he owns you body and soul, but he doesn't."

"Still, I owe him a lot of money," the minister said, despondently.

"Well, what if you do?" was the snapping answer.

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"He can be paid off out of that big salary. Humph! he can be paid off before you begin to draw it, as for that matter. Colonel Dyer will advance it at his bank. Leave it to me—I can manage that. I'll only have to show him that you are being persecuted here, and held down on account of it, and he will help us out. I understand men in general, and he is all right."

"I was thinking that Brother Chapman may take such a dislike to me that—that—" Olin's voice had dwindled to a mere jet of sound and stopped.

Mrs. Dwight eyed her son's profile studiously for a moment, then she shrugged her shoulders. "I wonder," she said, testily, "if you actually do think that girl is the only one worth noticing on earth? I don't want to be hard on you, Olin, but I really wish you would get right down to common sense. Myra is all right here in the mountains, among—among others like her, but she really would look just a little out of place over at Funstown in that fine parsonage. Why, she'd hardly know what to do or say. If she had been here with these gentlemen to-day, she would not have opened her mouth once, and—"

"You don't know her, mother!" Olin flared up, and turned round. "If you did, you would not talk that way. She has the most beautiful Christian character of any girl I ever knew. She is very bright and is the very woman for a minister's wife."

"Perhaps, for—for a place like *this*." Mrs. Dwight was more sure of her ground than adequate to the expression of it. "But over at Funstown a minister's wife, I understand, has to know how to

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get along with all the different factions. Take a girl, for instance, like—like Martha Brinsley. She has lived there all her life and traveled about. The people look up to her. She will come into a lot of money, and a girl of that sort would feel honored to be the wife of a brilliant young minister. My son, you are young—the world is before you. This appointment is only a stepping-stone to higher things, and a marriage with a girl like Myra would hold you down. Olin, you won't believe it, but your love for her is only puppy-love. As for her, she hasn't mind enough to know whether she wants you or not; but she *will* know as soon as this appointment is made public. She will decide then, and you ought to have more pride than to—"


Angry at her almost for the first time in his life, the young man turned abruptly and stalked into the house. His mother heard him walk through the hall and out at the rear door. Going back to her bedroom, she peered through a window and saw him standing silently under the apple-trees, his glance fixed on the grass.

"He's suffering," the observer muttered, "but it will be for his own good. "He simply mustn't take that green country girl over there. It would spoil the best chances a young man ever had. We'll be right next door to the Brinsleys, and he and Martha would meet nearly every day. Girls of that sort are crazy about young preachers. I wonder if Myra is not really in love with George Dawson. If she is—why, maybe—"

The cook had come to the door to ask about supper.



## CHAPTER XXX

N one way and another, Silas Dwight had learned of the coming visit of the committee from Funstown. Neither his wife nor his son had mentioned it to him, and yet his morbid forebodings supplied all that was vital of the facts. The extensive preparations for the dinner had not escaped him, nor the close conferences over the test-sermon, as, with the cautious tread of a burglar, he lurked about the house. He did not go to church on the all-important morning. Instead, he walked to a shaded spot on a hillside overlooking the village, and there in solitude he studied the active scene below. He saw the Funstown carriage arrive and deliver its passengers at the church door. He saw his wife and son come down the road and disappear from view. The clangor of the last bell reached his ears, but he was too far away to hear the opening singing. Dejectedly leaning against the trunk of a chestnut-tree, he waited till the service was over. He saw and made note of the departure of the Chapman faction. Then he saw the strangers bowing his wife and son into the Funstown carriage. Long after they had disappeared down the road, Silas remained on the hillside. He was glad to escape the formality of the sort of dinner he knew his politic wife was giv-

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ing. Under such routine he would have been a cowed, senile creature, only borne with as a natural calamity, and plainly branded as such. In the afternoon he saw the carriage pass through the village on its return to Funstown. Then he crept homeward through the woods, at once eager and alarmed over the possible outcome. The matter lay on his soul like a great weight. His early sin had spurred his wife on to the task of raising her son high above his illegitimate half-brother, and in the glory of that lay her revenge on him, on poor Jane Dawson, and on George. Was she to succeed? Was the acknowledged son already favored of God and man to rise so high that, by contrast, the other would be a mere dwarf beside him? Was George to remain a humble tiller of the soil, give over to his rival the creature for whom his soul yearned, and go through life the victim of the lust of an idle trifler?

No questions were put to Silas that evening at supper, and so he gave no account of his movements through the day. He gathered enough, however, from the satisfied mien of his wife to convince him that she had won in her endeavors, and, leaving his food untouched, he went out of the room. Yes, she had gained her point. God Himself, in the transaction of His written law, was visiting the sins of the father upon the head of the son.

Standing under the soft starlight, his gaze raised to the sky, Silas Dwight made his final resolve.

"It has come," he muttered in his throat. "I can't go a step further—not an inch. I'll go stark, staring crazy if I try to pass through another night. I'll do it now, and have it over."

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Moving quickly across the dewy grass, he entered the barn. In one of the cow-stalls, on a rafter overhead, he had hidden a thing which he now wanted. Standing on the gnawed edge of a feed-trough hewn from the trunk of a poplar, he reached up and grasped the object of his search in steady fingers and stepped down again. He looked about him and shuddered as from a current of cold air. To be found there in the trampled hay and manure was an idea from which he instinctively shrank. No, it should be out in the open—out under the stars. Thrusting the revolver beneath his coarse shirt, he climbed the snake fence and let himself down on the other side. He told himself that he would walk far enough from the house to prevent any one's hearing the revolver's report, and so he went up a little incline back of Jane Dawson's house. There was a light in the kitchen window, and a shadow flitted through it now and then. Something told him that it was the shadow of the woman whose life he had filled with shadows. Then all at once a vision of Jane as she appeared in her blooming young girlhood flashed before him, and his throat felt tight. Presently he found himself beneath a massive oak, the boughs of which grew just above his head and impinged upon a huge boulder behind him. He stood still for a moment, then suddenly he snatched his weapon from his shirt and grasped it in his right hand.

"I've had enough!" he whimpered, as he gazed at the stars. "I'm coming to you, God, to let you handle me as you think best. I don't ask for mercy. In fact, I deserve none, and expect none."

Placing the revolver against the side of his head,

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he cocked it. Just then he heard a sound behind him. Some animal, he thought—a stray cow, hog, or horse—was stirring in its lair. Peering into the shadow cast by the tree, he saw something moving against the boulder. It seemed to be in a crouching posture, but as it rose higher and advanced into the starlight he saw that it was a man.

"What are you about to do?" a startled voice demanded. "Great God, are you going to—"

It was George Dawson, and he advanced rapidly till the two men faced each other. Silas, still clutching the revolver, let it fall as far as the length of his limp arm, but he said nothing.

"Why, it's you!" George cried, fixing Silas with a horrified stare. "I—I thought it was some tramp, or—or—"

"Yes, it's me, George," came in harsh, dry tones. "There is no use trying to fool you. I'm here to wipe out my filthy life. I can't stand it another minute. I'm plumb done for."

"Absurd — absurd — nonsense!" George gasped, fairly overpowered by the horror of the thing. "You mustn't give way like that—be a—a man."

Silas uttered something like a ghastly laugh and sneer combined. "Huh! you'd be the last one to care a rap what I did if you knew the truth. In fact, you would—you, yourself, would—"

A sudden impulse seemed to fire the man with an odd resolve. Taking the revolver by the barrel, he extended the butt of it to George.

"Take it," he said, almost beneath his breath; "take it!"

"I certainly *will*," the young man obeyed. "I'm

## Jane Dawson

sure I wouldn't let *you* hold it, since you are so rash—so—”

“Wait! there! hold it in your right hand! It's cocked and loaded, and will do its work. Now—” Silas suddenly sank upon his knees, drew his body erect, and with both hands tore his shirt open till his bare breast was exposed. “Now, listen, and when you know all I am and have been, do your duty.”

“Why, why—” George began, but the kneeling man interrupted him.

“Hush, wait—just wait! You can't dream of what I'm going to let out. If you had known you'd have killed me long ago. I'm the man that committed the foulest crime that ever stained a human soul. I used the religion of God to lead one of the purest and gentlest of His creatures to eternal ruin. I'm the man who brought disgrace and lifelong misery to you and your mother. I'm your father. I'm the filthy man that gave you life. Now, now—quick—for God's sake, quick—” Silas closed his eyes and held his shirt wider open. “Shoot! I don't want to see the look in your face or hear you curse me, for God knows I love you. I love you more than I love anything else on earth. You are the only human being I ever did love—my wife, Olin, or—or anybody else. Quick—oh, God, quick!”

There was an awful pause. Silas's trunk stood like a block of stone. His chest, neck, and head might have been carved from granite, the eyeless face a death-mask of yellow marble. A moment passed; another; still George made no movement. Slowly, and in growing wonder, the old man opened

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his eyes. George had lowered himself to a sitting posture on the ground; the revolver lay on the grass at his feet. Silas saw him stroking his brow with a quivering hand. The church bell rang, and on the still, sultry air came the sound of singing.

"Why don't you—why don't you—?" But Silas could go no further. The strength of his body seemed to leave him, and he sank backward till he was seated as his son was seated. There was a long pause. Then Silas broke it. "Didn't you hear—didn't you understand?" he gasped.

"Yes, I understand now," George said, and there was no touch of resentment or anger in his voice. He picked up the revolver and slowly emptied the cartridges into his hand and threw them away. Then he leaned toward Silas, and his tone was full, round, and melting as he went on. "Now I understand why you have seemed to be so unhappy all these years. As a little boy, not more than six or seven, I remember how you used to come upon me in the woods and take me into your arms. Even as a child of that age I learned to look for sadness in you more than in any one else. Oh, if I'd only known—if I'd only known—"

"If you'd only known?" Silas found his voice to echo. "Oh, what do you mean, George; what *can* you mean?"

"If I had known, I think I could have comforted you," George answered. "I would have done my best to do so."

"You—you!" Silas gasped. "*You* who have to bear the brunt of it? You can't mean that you would not have hated and despised me?"

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"Yes, I do. I know now why I have always been drawn to you more than to any other man. I know now that I love you—that I shall not only love you in the future, but honor you as my father: You are a blind man groping in darkness, and your blindness led you to the edge of that abyss just now. But you sha'n't suffer like that any more. You are to be free—do you understand?—you are to be as free as the sunshine. I believe that good and only good can come out of everything that happens. I do not regret the manner of my birth. My sufferings have made a better man of me than I would have been otherwise. I may suffer still more, but even that will be for my ultimate good."

"Oh, George, do you reckon—" The voice broke. Silas dropped his shaggy head to his knees and sobbed aloud. Moving close to him, George put his arm about him.

"How can you feel that way?" he asked. "As for me, I am happier than I have ever been. I can't say why, but it is so. Perhaps it is because my mind is set at rest on one point. I have always wanted to—to realize that I actually *had* a father—to see him with my own eyes, to speak to him, and hear his voice, and yet there was always the fear that I'd not like him—not want to be near him—but now—"

"But now?" Silas raised his blearing, blood-shot eyes, and took a deep, trembling breath. His shoulders shook beneath the arm that caressed him.

"But now I know my father is a man I can love and respect—yes, *respect*," George threw into the yearning, upturned face. "I know how remorse

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and suffering refine and exalt the spirit, and you have borne your share. But you shall rest in peace from now on; I shall see to that. Will you promise me never again to think of—" George dropped his glance to the weapon on the ground.

"Oh, George, I'll do anything you want me to do. I lost control of myself. I couldn't stand what happened to-day." In halting tones he told of the possible result of Olin's sermon, and of his fears regarding Myra's final decision. As he finished he felt the arm on his shoulder slide downward, and, looking into his son's face, he saw that it was pinched and wrung by pain.

"I must bear that," George breathed, resignedly. "It will be the sort of life she is suited to. She encouraged him long ago, and she is too noble to disappoint him now. She believes as he does. She will be happy over at Funstown. She will be even more proud of him than she is, for he is going to rise high in his profession. He is sincere, and that will take him a long way."

"He sha'n't have her—by God, he sha'n't have her!" Silas blurted out, and he shook with passion in every limb. "He's got a lawful name; he's got a whole string of folks that worship the ground he walks on; he's got a doting, fool mammy; he's got his passport to the other shore, all wrote out, signed, and stamped, and they are waiting for him beyond the skies with twanging harps and tooting trumpets. When he dies he will go straight to the open arms of his Jesus. He may have them things, but he *sha'n't have your girl*. I know what I'm talking about—she loves you the most, and she ought to




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stick to you to the end. You say she'd be happy with him; she wouldn't any such thing. She'd dry up and rot with grief. You and her are mates, cut from the same pattern, and stamped with the same die. She needs you, and you need her. Damn it all, you'd be miserable without her, and I can't stand it—that's all, I can't stand it!"

Shaking with sobs, Silas struggled to his feet, and with bowed head he staggered away in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXXI

HE sun hung low in the saffron skies. The long day had been hot and sultry. Jane Dawson was moving in her usual slipshod way about the kitchen preparing supper. Her son sat in the shade of the house just outside the front door. He was worried about her, for she had appeared pale and distraught all day; there was a despondent stare in her eyes, a nervous quivering in her hollow cheeks and colorless lips.

Suddenly George heard a tin pan fall to the floor. She must have stooped to pick it up, for the next instant the jar of her body as it struck the floor resounded through the house. She uttered a faint cry, and followed it up with a sharp, piteous wail. Running in, he found her seated on the floor bracing herself on either side and feebly trying to rise. He picked her up in his arms, an awful conviction clutching his heart, and bore her to her bed in the next room. She gasped for breath three or four times, then she clutched his hand and held it in a convulsive clasp.

"I'm going to die!" she cried. "Oh, George, I'm going to die! I'm going to die, and I don't want to! I can't face it! It's awful! Save me! Do something! Run for a doctor—quick, quick!"

## Jane Dawson

"All right!" he answered; "try to be calm. I'll go as quickly as possible."

Hastening out at the rear door, he ran to the stable, and, bridling his horse, he sprang on its bare back and galloped away at high speed. At the end of the lane where it joined the main road he almost ran over Myra, who was on her way home from a visit in the village.

"She's dying!" he cried. "I'm going for the doctor. She is by herself."

"I'll go to her," Myra answered, the brave, calm grave look of an older woman settling on her face.

"Oh, thank you. I wish you would. She needs some one."

The next instant, with a fierce pounding of hoofs and in a cloud of dust he was off. Hurrying into the house, Myra went to Jane's bed. She was sitting up, wildly stroking her right hand and arm and moaning and uttering ejaculations pregnant with terror.

"I'm dying!" she gasped, as she looked into the girl's face. "The feeling has gone out of this arm and shoulder. My tongue feels thick. I can hardly draw my breath, and my heart has almost quit."

"George has gone for the doctor," Myra said, in as soothing a tone as her perturbation would allow. "He will bring him as quick as he can."

Jane bent forward to the quilt and groaned. Her hair had become unfastened and hung down the sides of her neck. "The doctor can't help me," she gasped. "I found out the last time I went to Funstown that I hadn't long to live. I thought I'd get used to the idea, but I ain't. I can't bear it. It's

## Jane Dawson

got to come—I know that—but I can't bear it. I—I've always been afraid, but I didn't think it would be as bad as this. Oh, it's awful!"

"You must let me pray for you," Myra said. She was kneeling down at the bedside when Jane reached out and caught her hand.

"No, no!" she cried. "Not that—don't make it worse than it is. I don't want you to pray without knowing the truth. I went back to meeting for George's sake, but I can't die with a lie on my lips. I wasn't converted. I went there and made out I was, but I was just pretending. You may tell 'em all I owned up to the truth. I thought it would help, but it didn't. A step like that couldn't change a mind as strong as George's. He has hope of some sort, but I haven't a speck. It is all black ahead—black and empty and awful. You can't do nothing—I can't do nothing—no living man can help a bit."

"Oh, you must have faith; you must believe." Out of the dead silence Myra's sweet voice rose like a strain of music. She lowered her head to the bed, covered her face, and prayed as she had never prayed before. Staring at her with despondent eyes, and uttering little intermittent moans of fear, Jane sank back on her pillow. Some chickens in search of food had entered the door and were dimly chirping as they stalked about the room. Jane's cow at the lot fence was mooing, as she stood with a heavy bag looking at her sleek young calf on the other side. A gray house-cat entered the room, stretched itself with stiffening limbs, and yawned and lay down on the rag carpet and dropped to sleep. Here was life; here was death.

## Jane Dawson

Her prayer finished, and with a calm feeling of resignation, Myra raised her hand. Then she started as she saw the parted lips and the glazed and drooping eyes of the sick woman, and noticed that there was no visible movement of the flat chest.

Was she dead? Myra stood up, felt the hands. They were limp and growing cold. She applied her ear to the region of the heart. There was no noticeable palpitation. She took Jane's wrist, and was feeling for her pulse, when, with a sudden gasp for breath, the breast heaved and Jane opened her eyes wider.

"Oh, oh!" she cried, extending her arms upward. "Thank God! Oh, mother—oh, father! I'm so glad. Oh, it is so—so beautiful; so sweet, so glorious!"

Then, as if waking from a dream, Jane turned her head and looked inquiringly at Myra and about the room. Presently she caught the girl's hand, and held it in an exultant clasp.

"Don't bother," she said, in a tone which thrilled Myra as no voice had ever done before, and the dying woman's face and eyes were resplendent as from a light within. "Don't worry over me. I am all right now. I am convinced at last. Tell George everything is right. I had a strange experience—the oddest ever a human had, I reckon. While you was praying just now, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I was trying hard to get my breath, when all at once I actually felt myself leave my body. I stood there at the door and looked back and saw you and it here as plain as I see you now. I went out in the yard and looked about trying to under-

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stand it. I seemed to have a body, and yet I didn't. Then I thought about George, and that instant I was by his side away out on the mountain road. His horse had sprained its ankle in jumping a fence to make a short cut, and he was leading it along in a great hurry and worried about me. I was as close to him as I am to you. I put out my hand, but couldn't make him see me. Then a great—something fell around me. I don't know what it was. I'd call it light; but it wasn't that. I'd call it music; but it wasn't that. It seemed as if I could look for miles and miles through it to something even more glorious beyond. I felt as light as a feather, and, oh, so full of delight! Then I saw my mother and father coming toward me. They didn't look like they ever had before, and yet I knew them. They were crying with joy over seeing me. They caught me and held me and led me toward the—the thing I saw, telling me I had got only to the bare edge of it, and couldn't imagine what was ahead. Then, just then, I seemed to feel you put your ear to my breast, and take hold of my wrist. My mother and father seemed to be pulling me with them, but I couldn't move, for you were holding my hand. Then I heard my mother say, as plain as I am talking now. She said, 'Don't be frightened, darling, you will shake it off in a minute. It was that way with me.'

Myra could only stare in wonder during this recital. Jane was chuckling and rubbing her hands. "I'm satisfied now," she declared—"oh, so satisfied! I believe I've actually looked into the life that George talks about. I'm sure now that every suf-

## Jane Dawson

fering soul on earth—hush! hush! there, look! Can't you see? Oh, look! It's coming! It's here again! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

And so Jane Dawson died, her eyes wide open and reflecting a light as yet unseen by mortal man. Her worn face was transfigured. On it lay the trusting smile of girlhood. The lines anguish had cut were smoothed away. A faint, pink glow had risen through the ivory tints. Myra bent and kissed her on the cheeks. She folded the limp hands on the breast and went and stood in the doorway. The sun was down, and all the sky along the western horizon seemed to have been dipped in the blood of the day that was gone. Down the road, walking rapidly, she saw George coming. She went to the gate to meet him, her heart and soul in her aching throat.

"How is she?" were his first words.

She held the gate ajar for him to enter. She tried to put consolation into her look and tone.

"It is too late," she said, giving him both her hands. "She passed away only a moment ago. You would feel better about it if you could have been with her."

"I went as fast as I could," he explained, his manly face settling into resignation. "The doctor was over the mountain. To make a short cut I tried to cross Tidwell's pasture, a mile away, but my horse stumbled and sprained his ankle, and could not go on. Tidwell went after the doctor on his colt, and I left my horse and came back as quickly as I could, hoping, at least, to get here before it was over. Somehow, I did not think she had a chance. Tell me, did she suffer—did she?"

## Jane Dawson

"Not a bit. I have never seen any one die before; but—oh, George, it was beautiful—glorious! I will tell you all about it later, but now I must inform the neighbors. They will come and attend to everything."

He took her hands again. His eyes were full to overflowing. His strong breast rose and fell tumultuously. "I'm glad—oh, so glad that you were with her!" he gulped. "You are the only one she would have cared to have. I shall never forget your kindness."



## CHAPTER XXXII



THEY buried Jane Dawson's body late in the afternoon of the next day. There was considerable discussion among the members of the church as to the propriety of having a formal service in the little meeting-house, as was the custom. Olin was in favor of honoring the dead woman in every possible way, and had already conceived a suitable sermon based on Jane's long struggle against evil influences outside the fold, and her final return to the faith of her people. He spoke of his plan to his mother, anticipating her usual warm approval, but to his surprise she made no comment, giving only a shrug of her shoulders. They were in his study when the subject came up. They had just been talking of the coming, on the morrow, of a dressmaker from Ringgold, who was to stay in the house and prepare some gowns for Mrs. Dwight to wear at Funstown after his appointment to the post at that town, which appointment was now regarded as a certainty. Instead of answering his suggestion in regard to the proposed obsequies, Mrs. Dwight simply went to the window and stood toying with the cord of the shade and looking out. He followed and stood behind her.

"You didn't say what you thought about the

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funeral?" He touched her arm, the light of spiritual enthusiasm in his eyes. "You see, I always admired her. She was kind and gentle to me as a child when I used to play over there with poor George."

Mrs. Dwight gave another of her characteristic shrugs. She had not made a life study of her sworn enemy to be taken in by such an obvious thing as Jane's widely discussed "change of heart," though she had seen no reason for making her discovery public. In fact, she was in no mood for any contention with her son. Not only was Jane dead and out of her calculations, but there were matters pertaining to her own future which were far more vital. In fact, nothing relating to the village was now of interest. She had always despised it, and she did so now more than ever.

"You don't seem to favor the idea," Olin pursued, seeing that his mother was still silent.

"It is like this," she said, in her colorless way, as she still looked through the window. "A funeral service is really intended to give comfort to the living as well as to show respect for the dead. You see, there is only her son left, and—well, I should think it would be pretty hard to know exactly what would be appropriate when you consider that he has never been one of us. He would be the only mourner, you know, and as he would naturally sit alone on the first bench, if he came at all, why—well, don't you see you would be giving him something he wouldn't care for—wouldn't believe in, and in fact, it might be objectionable."

"I see," Olin said, a look of boyish chagrin on

## Jane Dawson

his face. "And I'm sure you are right. Of course, George would not decline a proposal like that; but I reckon we may as well leave it out. Reading and prayer at the grave would, perhaps, be in better taste."

And so it was arranged. The sun was low when Jane's remains were borne in a farmer's wagon to the village churchyard. Thirty or forty neighbors, men, women, and children, followed the simple coffin from the house. George walked alone behind it. On the coffin there was a great wreath of roses which Myra had gathered in her garden, and their fragrance filled the sultry air. At the churchyard six farmers took the coffin from the wagon and solemnly bore it to the open grave, where the new earth lay red and moist in an irregular heap. With his hat off, and his high, white brow exposed to the slanting rays of the setting sun, Olin read a chapter from the Bible, made a touching tribute to the dead woman; spoke of her long upward struggle which had ended in absolute peace of soul; offered up a prayer in a voice that shook with genuine feeling, and the coffin was lowered into the earth.

According to village custom, the grave was then filled by friends who volunteered their services. A man would use a spade or a shovel till another would step forward and ask for his place. While this routine was going on, Silas Dwight stood in the group. His face was rigid, and there was a hunted look in his shifting eyes. Across the grave at Olin's side stood his wife, and Silas caught her staring at him with a studious, watchful gaze. He fancied that he was reading her thoughts.

## Jane Dawson

"Go on! help cover her up!" she seemed to be saying behind relentless lips. "You laid her there—finish the job. Don't shirk your duty."


Just then a man who had arrived with two spades borrowed from Petigree's store handed one to Silas and started to work with the other. It was a grim and awful moment; but Silas took the implement, and, like a machine and almost blindly he worked till a man behind him relieved him. Then Silas slunk back in the crowd. He was suffering acutely. George's evident forgiveness and good-will toward him were, for the nonce, forgotten. What power on earth or in heaven could wipe out the effect of the young man's bowed and broken attitude? From the outer edge of the churchyard, behind a hedge of boxwood, where he stood pretending to read the inscriptions on the tombstones, Silas saw the assemblage disperse. He experienced a grateful thrill at the sight of George walking homeward with the Chapman family, and he fell in behind them inwardly chuckling as he moved along the dusty road.

"Huh, I can see through the old skunk!" he mused. "He's mad at Olin for going to Funstown, and he thinks he can make him jealous. Well, he's wasting his time—Olin is too white-livered; he hasn't got blood enough to get real hot over a thing like that. The world is full of women that could pacify that fellow. He's a mourner's bench hero. He's got the whole, big, round world to save, and he's too busy to grieve long over one single pair of eyes. He don't know that gal, anyway; but, I'll bound you, George does. They say she was the only one on hand when Jane died. I'll bet that tied her an'

## Jane Dawson

him tighter together than they ever was before. Most gals of that age would have turned tail and run; but Myra didn't; she shouldered the responsibility like the great woman she is from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. By gum, George is going in their gate! I'll bet they have asked him to supper. Good for you, old Chapman—you ain't so bad, after all!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII

OM MELL had put on his best clothes and gone to the burial. He was a sensitive man, and he had the feeling that since Jane had gone back to the church, and was being buried under its rites, he, who was known to have such antagonistic views, ought not to be conspicuous at the service. So, from the edge of the crowd he viewed it all, his gaze resting chiefly on the bowed figure of the sole mourner.

"He's the saddest, loneliest fellow I ever laid eyes on," Mell mused, a lump in his throat. "Things have gone crooked with him ever since he was born, and I reckon if some'n ain't done they will keep on that way."

As the grave was being filled, Mell retreated from the spot. He found himself on the porch of Petigree's store. Petigree was at the pump in the wagon yard in the rear, and Mell had no company on the porch except a sleeping cat and a coop of chickens marked for shipment to Funstown. He saw George pass in company with the Chapmans, and he, too, made note of the unusual occurrence. Mell had thought he would try to see George on the way home; but he now saw that was not possible, and so he crossed the square to his own home.

## Jane Dawson

At nine o'clock that evening he was at the gate of George's house waiting for the young man to return from Chapman's. A new moon was rising, and the valley and hills lay under an entrancing veil, which gave them the appearance of something other than material objects. Tom shuddered as he glanced into the open doorway of the house. He could almost fancy seeing Jane and hearing her step in her kitchen and sitting-room, to which long habit had held her.

"George mustn't stay here by himself," Mell declared. "If he won't go home with me, I'll bunk with him. He just shall have company."

The clicking of the metallic latch on the front gate at Chapman's fell on his ear, and, looking down the road, he saw George slowly approaching. Mell went to meet him. He took his arm without a word, and turned back to the gate.

"I thought I'd drop by and make you spend the night with me," Mell suggested, tentatively. "You see, of course, I reckon you must be sort o' lonely."

"Oh, I thank you." George shook his head, while a grateful light suffused his face. "It is good of you to think of it, but I'd rather stay here. I want to get up before sunrise and do some work that must be done."

"Then how about—? I was wondering if you'd like company," Mell proposed, as they passed through the gateway. "I can stay here as easy as not."

"Thank you, but I sha'n't need any one," George answered. "It is very kind of you to offer it, but

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really I'd rather be alone to-night." He spoke thus, and yet a chill of utter desolation was on him. The thought that his mother was not there to greet him—that she would never be there again as of old—pressed him down into the very ooze of despair.

"I see, I see," the miller said. They had reached the steps of the little house, and George went inside and returned with a couple of chairs, which he placed on the grass in the yard.

Mell, by sheer habit, brushed the knee of his new trousers as he sat down, and he flicked at a tiny moonbeam on the shoulder of his black coat. George was silent, and the pause was becoming awkward to the miller, for he had something to say and knew not how to introduce it. Presently he faltered:

"I was sorter pleased to see you walking home with the Chapmans. As some poet or other has remarked, 'One touch of Nature makes the whole world akin.' The old fellow, I reckon, knows his own end may come any day, and he's naturally ashamed to harbor ill-will at such a time as this. Besides, your ma and his daughter was powerful good friends. It was beautiful, George, the way them two, so different in ages and general experience, stuck by one another."

The young man made no response for a moment, then he said:

"Yes, Mrs. Chapman asked me in to supper. And they were all very kind."

"I was wondering if—if your ma's death would make any difference in your plans to go to Seattle?" the miller asked, still awkwardly.



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"No; there is really nothing to keep me here now," George returned. "And as soon as I have gathered my corn and cotton I shall go. The firm is willing to hold the place open for me."

"So, so," Mell muttered, aimlessly. He was silent for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders, bent forward with his elbows on his knees, and in a voice that was quite tremulous he blurted out: "I was wondering, George, if—if you'd mind if I sold out here lock, stock, and barrel and went along too?"

"Why, of course, I should like it—like it immensely!" George exclaimed, in hopeful surprise. "I really wish you would."

"I've been considering it ever since you first spoke of going." Mell hung to his beard now with both hands. "George, I don't know how to explain it, but I've got so much attached to you in all our funny ups-and-downs with these folks that, whenever the thought come that you was going away off where I'd not see you any more, why—well, it cut like a knife in the quick, and to-day, when they laid your poor ma away, why"—the miller's voice trailed away on the still moonlight—"why, it broke me clean to pieces, and I couldn't wait to ask you if you'd let me—"

"Let you?" George's delight was obvious. "I'd rather have you with me there than anything I can think of. I don't exactly like the idea of—of going among strangers, but if you were along it would simply be fine."

"Then I'll go," Mell answered. "I want to see

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something of the world before I die, and a new, stirring place like they say that is sort o' catches my fancy. There is another thing, George," he went on, his agitation increasing. "As you no doubt know, I ain't exactly what you might call a poor man. For some reason or other making money and laying it out in profitable ways always come easy to me. I've got a good many solid interests here and there. George, I never shall marry—I've made up my mind on that point, and I haven't got but just one thing now in view. George, I have made you my legal heir to all I've got on earth. The papers are all drawn up and signed and witnessed in due form."

"Why, surely, you can't mean—" But George was now recalling what Silas Dwight had told him he had overheard at Trotter's office, and he could only stare in astonishment.

"Not only that, George." Mell folded his hands tightly between his knees. "But here is something else. I asked Colonel Trotter about it, and he said it was often done when there was no objections on either side. George, I'm a sorter fool about a certain thing. I have always kept track of the Mell name in this country. As far as I know, only one ever landed in America. He was among the first English settlers in South Carolina in 1675. For some reason or other there are powerful few of the name alive, and I sorter hate to see my end of it die clean out. I was wondering if you'd let me adopt you and give you my name. George, I wish you would. Of course, you wouldn't be called by it here, but out there in Seattle, making a new

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start, nobody would know the difference, and—and—”

“I know what you mean,” George answered, his frame shaken by gratitude as he leaned forward and took the miller’s hand. “It is the thing that”—he glanced instinctively into the house—“that she would have wanted above all else. I couldn’t refuse on her account, even if I wanted to on my own. But I don’t want to. You have made me happier than I ever expected to be.”

“Then it is settled?” the miller cried, with enthusiasm. “Lord, Lord, won’t we have a good time! I’ll piddle along at something or other out there to keep me out of mischief, and you will study and go to the top in your line. But how about”—Mell looked over the fence in the direction of Chapman’s house—“you know I was wondering—you see that old skunk is about the greediest chap on earth, and I thought that maybe, now that you will have something substantial ahead, that, instead of being against you, why, in fact, he—”

“He has nothing to do with Myra.” George saw Mell’s drift, and his words fell crisp and heavy. “She and I had a talk to-night. The others left us on the lawn together. She has encouraged Olin too far to drop him now. She feels that she is duty bound to go with him to Funstown. They have been friends a long, long time, and with her faith she’d never be happy with a man like me. For her sake, if I could do so, I’d believe as she believes; but that is a thing which no man can control. He either believes or disbelieves, and that settles it. She will be happy as a minister’s wife, and I want to see her

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so. I can get along some way or other. You see, it isn't as if I were giving up something I had ever possessed. I have never felt that I had the slightest chance of being any nearer to her than I am. I have known all along about her and Olin. When he was off at college she used to tell me about their letters, and, knowing her as I did, you see, I simply could not look on her in any other light than as his—"

"I see," Mell filled the pause, "you make out like—you talk pretty big about getting on all right without her, and yet you can't even say the word that was on your tongue just now. George, I ain't satisfied. I ain't satisfied because there is something crooked in the whole business. I know Olin wants her—he'd be a fool if he didn't, but, as little as I know about courting, I'll bet if you do go away and leave her to him you'll leave a miserable woman behind."

"I—I can't think that," George faltered, and yet his eyes burned under their lashes like living coals.

"Of course *you* can't," Mell sniffed, "because you never did rate yourself as high as you deserve, and because you are trying to make her out to be more than human. Of course, struggling over what she thinks is her duty to another chap, she ain't going to let you know all she feels; but she makes a poor out hiding it from me. I saw her at the gate last night after your ma passed away. She walked along the road with me clean to the branch. She was plumb full of the way your ma died, and stopped to cry several times. She wanted to know if I 'lowed you'd go West, and when I told her I thought that was your calculation, she got white in the face and

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walked unsteady and stumped her toe once or twice. We had got to the branch when we saw Olin coming across the pasture toward us. I knew and she knew that he was making for her to walk home with her, but without a word she turned back and hurried home as fast as she could go. She didn't say so; but I'd bet all I have on earth that she wanted to dodge him. I stood and watched, and she made a bee-line home through the thicket. You needn't tell me that she'd have acted that way if she actually cared for him. She's just got herself tangled up, like young and kind-hearted girls will, with a man she's quit caring for in the right sort of way. He wants her, and he may hold her to whatever understanding they have; but she will go to him with a heart that is aching for another fellow. I don't know what to do, or what to advise, but I know the thing ain't right. Women are built for sympathy, and she has been so sorry for you all along that she loves you deep and strong. She may go with Olin to Funstown and put up with that cranky, stuck-up mammy of his, and play second fiddle the rest of her life; but she'll never be happy."

When Mell had gone, George remained seated in the moonlight. He had derived no material hope from his friend's assertions, and yet the realization that Myra cared for him seemed to fill the whole universe like a delicious, tangible substance. She would be another's wife, but she would remember him. He would be far away, fighting for existence among strangers; but he would never give her place to another.

## CHAPTER XXXIV



THE remainder of the summer passed. The autumn came on with crisp, cool breezes, hints of early frost, and wondrous tints of mountain foliage. The gossips in and about the village were reaping a rare harvest. The news was well circulated and confirmed that Olin had accepted the appointment at Funstown, and would soon go over to take up his new duties. It was reported that Chapman had threatened to take the matter to court, and many thought this would surely happen, as there was no disputing the fact that Olin was in his benefactor's debt to the extent of so many actual dollars and cents which he was unable to pay. However, when this part of the affair was being agitated at its height, Mrs. Dwight played an unexpected card—if such a term may be applied to the mother of a minister in a rural church. She packed up some things and made a hurried visit to an uncle in Augusta, where she spent a week. The villagers never learned how it was managed, but when she returned home she repaired at once to Trotter's law-office, and the lawyer immediately afterward sought Chapman and his three friends, who were whittling sticks and watching a game of checkers in front of the livery-stable. Trotter in-

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vited the three back into a vacant stall, odorous of manure and fermenting straw, and, drawing out a receipt and a roll of currency, he tendered them with a bow and most satisfied smile. Chapman, in great fury, was refusing the money; but the eager hands of Lee and Strobe had already received it, and they were chattering about division, so there was nothing to do but let them have their own.

The gossips noted that Chapman went no more to hear his protégé preach, and was scarcely on speaking terms with his wife and daughter, who did go. On one occasion Chapman was heard to say at Petigree's store that preachers and church people were rotten to the core, and that what George Dawson had said in his memorable speech about their narrow, grasping spirit and general moral blindness was nothing but the truth. It wasn't a thing, he declared, but gaudy show and parade that Olin and his mother were after. They had risen on the bowed bodies of humble people, and were now about to gather the plums extended by the rich and vain. Moreover, it was no secret that Silas Dwight had been given to understand that he was to stay on at the farm, being entirely too uncouth to fit into the prospective splendor.

Another morsel the gossips chewed upon was George Dawson's marvelous good fortune. They had heard of the miller's munificent legal provision, and many rejoiced over it and thought it was the best thing that could have happened to a deserving young man who was liked for the firmness with which, right or wrong, he had stood to his convictions. George had already rented his farm to a

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reliable tenant, and Mell had sold his mill, and was going to settle some other matters and follow his adopted son to the bustling Western city.

It was the afternoon before the day of his departure. George had everything in readiness, even to the packing of his trunk, and he decided that he would pay a last visit to his mother's grave. Avoiding the loiterers in the village square, by taking a short way through the woods, he soon reached the little churchyard. Here he was met by a surprise, for he found his mother's grave covered with flowers. They were scarcely withered at all, and he was sure they had been put there since the middle of the day. Seating himself on a stone near by, he bowed his head in his hands, and tears of gratitude welled up in his eyes.

"Myra did it!" he muttered. "God bless her—she did it! No one else would have thought of it."

He sat there till the sun went down; till the dusk came on and the tombstones about him began to vanish in the shadows creeping over the face of the land. The stars came out. The grass between the mounds was growing damp from dew. Fireflies sped and flashed here and there. A cricket somewhere beneath the decayed old church was snarling; a tree-frog in an oak near the belfry was chirping; a villager with a resonant voice was calling to his hogs—"Pig-ooop, pig-ooo! pig-ooop, pig-ooo!" The outlines of the nearest mountain were lost in the dusk, but along its side, red and yellow, forest fires were burning. A sickening sensation of despair came over George, and he rose and tried to shake it off. Despite the fact that his life there had been



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sad and hard, he loved the place with his whole heart. Taking a last look at the flower-draped mound, he turned homeward.

He was just on the point of entering his gate when he saw a form on Chapman's lawn. It might be Myra, he told himself, and he would go over and say good-by. It was she, and, seeing him crossing the road, she came to the gate to meet him. The shadows had thickened, but it was light enough for him to see her face. It was downcast and colorless. She tried to smile as she greeted him, but the result was only a pitiful grimace, and the hand she gave him was cold and quivered in his clasp.

"You are all ready?" she faltered. "I suppose you leave early in the morning?"

"Yes, Mr. Mell—you see I still call him that—he will drive me over to Funstown in the morning, and then come back to finish some business here before joining me in the West a few weeks later."

Myra bent over a rose-bush and plucked a bud, which she held to her nose and then ruthlessly crushed in her fingers.

"After all, it seems so very sudden," she steadied her voice to say. "Of course, I knew the day you'd decided on, and that you'd have to go; but—but really it will seem almost impossible to think you won't be there"—she glanced over the fence at his house—"just as you always have been. I wonder," she shuddered, "if all of us don't get pessimistic and discouraged as we grow older and see how—how futile things are. All day long I have felt as if my youth were gone forever. You see, George, you belong to my girlhood days, and you are going out

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into the great, wide world to make your place among strangers."

"The change for you will be considerable, too," he said, tentatively. "Funstown is not so far off, but it is quite different from this. Besides, that will be only a stepping-stone. Olin is going to rise. He is bound to. Preachers as eloquent as he is are very rare."

She lowered her head. He saw her draw in her lips. She plucked and crushed another rose and tossed it from her. She made no response to his pointed remark, and was silent for some time. Then she said, with a faint, forced smile:

"George, I give way to the blues often now. It seems to me that I am afraid of many things of late. I am getting despondent—morbid. I have morbid thoughts constantly, and they are so unusual with me. You know I used to have a cheerful disposition—"

"More cheerful," he threw in, "than any one I ever knew."

"I didn't believe that anything could make me absolutely miserable," she resumed. "You see, my religion supplied every want. I had a way of unburdening myself of every gloomy thought by prayer, but of late prayer doesn't seem to help at all. And this is good-by, actually good-by! You won't ever again go out of your door and ride away to your work, as I used to see you do of mornings. We won't meet this way *one single other time*."

She paused. He could see the lace about her neck quivering, her white throat throbbing like that of a warbling bird.

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"I have just been to my mother's grave," he said. "I know you must have put the flowers there, and I thank you with all my heart."

Myra looked at him steadily. "Yes, I did it. I loved her, George. I think I loved her actually more than I ever did any other woman. To me she was the grandest creature that ever lived, and the fact that she loved and trusted me is the sweetest memory I shall ever have. When I went to her grave to-day I almost felt that she was there with me—that she appreciated the flowers."

"I saw Olin this morning, and said good-by," George remarked, seeing that she was going no further. "He has a good heart, and seemed sorry to have me leave. I thought he was not looking as well as usual."

"He is not looking well," Myra said. "I hardly know how to make him out. I really think he is having some trouble at home. He almost admitted it last night. I can't make it out, but I think it concerns his mother. He is so loyal and noble that he will not criticize anything she does; but I am sure she has said something or done something that has upset him. He was very excited last night, and begged me again to consent to be his wife, but—"

"You haven't yet?" George cried. "Why, I thought that—"

Myra's mouth twitched sensitively; there was a grayish cast to her face. "I'm a foolish, sentimental girl," she said, in a low tone, "but somehow I simply can't give him my actual promise till—till—"

"Till he is established at Funstown?" George groped.

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She avoided his eyes. She plucked another rosebud, the tiny thorns pricking her fingers.


"Till after you are gone," she finished, and a sob shook her from head to foot. "He can wait," she added, bitterly. "I'll do my duty by him—if it comes to that, but—but he will have to wait."

They walked across the grass slowly. "It is very kind of you to think of me at all in such a connection," he heard himself saying. "I realize that it is out of sympathy for me, for, of course, you know how much I—"

"Don't say it, dear George." She put her soft hand on his lips. "Don't make it any harder for me. I am in an awful condition. In a minute I'll break down and cry. I am only a poor weak woman whose heart—whose whole heart— Good-by, George. I wish you every good thing in—" Then, wringing his hand, she suddenly left him.

He heard her sob as she moved away in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXXV

EARLY the next morning, ensconced behind the curtains of one of the parlor windows, Myra saw the miller drive up in his buggy to the gate of George's house and sit smoking a cigar and lashing the air with his whip. He seemed to be speaking to some one, but the sound of his voice fell before it reached her, and Myra could not see George, who was evidently within the house.

"He's going! oh, he's going!" she kept saying to herself. "I'll see him when he comes out, and then, perhaps, never again on earth. Oh, how can I bear it?"

The next instant her heart stood still; she held her breath, for George was coming through the gate, a valise in his hand. She saw him smile and nod to Mell, and then go to the end of the buggy and deposit his bag. Then he returned to the house, perhaps to see if he had securely locked the door, for when he came back he gave the miller something which might have been a key. Then George took a seat beside Mell, and they were off. She saw George glance toward her, and even at the distance she read the dumb despair in his eyes. The next instant the trotting horses had borne him out of sight.

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"Myra! Myra!" It was her mother calling from the kitchen.

"What is it, mother?" She scarcely recognized her own voice, it was so constrained and guttural.

"I see Olin coming this way." The answer came in a clatter of dishes and pans. "I know he wants to see you."

"He sha'n't—he sha'n't—not now—not now!" Myra said to herself. "I can't see him now. If he comes and talks of love, of religion, of God, of anything, I'll hate him. I can't stand any more. I'll go crazy. Oh, George, George, is it the last—the very last? Shall I never see your sweet, patient face again? Are we parted forever—forever and ever—is this *really* the end?"

With the pallor of death upon her, she slipped out into the hall and thence sped across the veranda and the yard, keeping the house between her and the approaching minister. The next moment she passed out through the gate and was hurrying into the woods and making her way across Silas Dwight's uncleared land. There was a little rise ahead of her, and from that point of vantage she hoped to catch another view of the road along which George was speeding. Breathlessly she tore her way through the clinging vines and briers, springing over the fallen trunks of trees, and darting round moss and lichen-grown mounds. Presently the brow of the hill was reached. On it stood a mammoth rock, the base of which was buried in the earth. Up its rugged slant she climbed, bruising her ungloved hands and silently whimpering in a paroxysm of despair. She was now above the tops of the nearest pines, and

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could see the Funstown road, red and lonely, as it wound in and out among the hills. She was in time; she hugged that meager consolation to her breast as she strained her sight through the sunlight.

"There, there!" her heart cried out, and then it sank into an ooze of sheer agony, for only the back part of George's head was in view, and the bend of the road would shut him out of sight in a moment. A blur came before her eyes. He was gone. The earth seemed to be rocking. She thought she was fainting, and sank to a seat on the stone. She kept her eyes closed. Several minutes passed. Presently the sound of a human voice beat through the mental stupor that was upon her. It seemed to come from beneath the rock, and peering over its edge she saw the tangled hair and beard and bowed shoulders of Silas Dwight. He wore no coat and was on his knees by the stump of a pine which he had just felled. He was clutching the handle of his axe with both hands, and his face was turned to the full glare of the sun. The broad bottoms of his coarse cowhide shoes stood on their toes; his frayed trousers had slid up his ankle, showing his hairy calves. She saw his lips move. He was praying.

"Oh, God Almighty, if you have ears for mortal man, listen to me. Have mercy, have mercy! George is my son, my first-born—the pride of my body and soul. Through me he has suffered the pangs of hell. Don't scourge him any more. Beat me, kick me, burn me in lasting flames, but spare him. He's suffered enough. Don't let him leave to-day with that bleeding heart inside of him. Give the poor boy the mate you made for him and put in

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his track. He'll never have a minute's happiness away out there while she is here with another man. Spare him! Spare him! Reward him, for he deserves it. Help him; give him relief from the pain that's on him, or I'll—I'll turn devil! I mean it. I can stand just so much and no more. I've reached the end. I've done everything I know how to do to right the wrong I did. You've scourged me; you've afflicted me; you've made me a contemptible thing in the sight of my kind; you've made me an outcast tied to the bosom of a family that don't want me; but this to-day is the worst of all. The sight of his pale face and sad eyes last night when he told me good-by will stick to me through eternity. He said he loved me—he told me that again—that he loved me more, even, than the man who is doing so much for him, and that I ought to quit grieving and believe in your boundless love and mercy. He told me that—that—that! Oh, God, have mercy now. Show me some way out."

The voice was drowned in a sob. Myra saw the old hands slowly sliding down the handle of the axe to the pile of chips on which it rested. Even at that distance she could see his gaunt limbs quivering. Suddenly, in changing her position, she dislodged a loose stone. It rolled over the edge and crashed into the dry underbrush and drifts of leaves near the bowed man. He looked up. Their eyes met in a steady stare. Silas drew himself erect, dropped his axe, and stood with folded arms facing her, a blended look of shame and dogged defiance on his face.

"You heard me!" he said, desperately. "Well, it



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don't matter a hill of beans. He'd have told you, in time. Now you know *who* I am—*what* I am."

"I didn't know you were there," Myra faltered, still too miserable fully to grasp the situation. "I was looking, watching—"

"I know; you was trying to see what I was trying to avoid. I trumped up this wood-cutting to get away from home this morning before it was light. I couldn't stand the sight of—of my own flesh and blood driving off with—but you understand, surely you do now."

"Yes, yes, I understand, and I am sorry for you." She made a movement as if to rise, but he held up his hands protestingly.

"Don't! Don't! Set there!" he cried. "Wait, wait, I must talk to you—I just must, now before it is too late! Why, girl—don't you see? Can't you understand? He's on his way. He'll take the train from Funstown to-night if—if—wait! I'm coming."

With shambling gait he hurried round to the sloping side of the rock. She heard him crashing through the bushes above which she could see his hatless head and shoulders. For a few minutes she lost sight of him, then she heard him half crawling, half walking and stumbling at every step up the side of the stone. He reached her, stood still for a moment, and then sank at her feet panting for breath, his lip hanging limp and quivering.

"It all rests with you," he pleaded, piteously. "It is in your hands. I could have strangled you last night when he come to the fence to tell me good-by, and told me you and him had parted for good and all. The poor boy could hardly talk. I tell you,

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woman, he loves you as no other woman ever was loved in this world or any other. He'd suffer death rather than have pain come to your little finger, and that's what is the matter with him now. He's not only suffering over losing you, but over the other thing."

"The other thing?" Myra started and stared wonderingly.

"Yes; he knows you ain't going to be plumb happy with Olin. He wouldn't tell you so, but he couldn't hide it from me. He knows it down at the bottom of his big heart, and he is miserable over it. He don't care for himself; he can go on having trouble like he has had from the cradle up, through no fault of his own, but he can't bear to have one cloud of it pass over you."

"I know it, I know it," Myra all but sobbed.

Silas thrust out his gaunt hand and laid it firmly on her knee; he clutched it; he shook it. "You say that, and yet you let him go? Your shame ought to burn you up where you set. You know what you are to him?"

"I am doing my duty as I see it," Myra faltered.

"Your duty! Pooh!" Silas snapped his calloused fingers in her face. "Your God, nor mine, nor no other man's God ever laid down a duty as mean as that is. I tell you, you are turning from the deserving one. I know what he is suffering because I've made it my business to watch every look that ever settled on his face. Olin can get along, but George can't. Olin's got his hymn-singing crowd, his mourning-bench worshipers, his crazy mammy,

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and he will be petted and doted on wherever he goes. Take him, and you will always fill a second place. You don't know his mammy—nobody does as well as I do. You go to live with her and you will wish you was dead. She will put you where she put me. She's a fiend of hell in a woman's frock. She's hounded one poor soul to her grave, and she ain't satisfied. She hates the bones and ashes of Jane Dawson. She knows you pitied the poor woman, and was with her at the end, and she will bear that grudge against you till you are put under ground. You think she will let you marry her boy, I reckon. You wait and see. She hain't no more notion o' having that come to pass than she has o' flying. She will beat you at the game if she has to blacken your character to do it, pure and noble as you are. I've heard little jabs of spite already. I've seen Olin wince under 'em time and again. He's too simple in spirit to see how dirty her motives are. She is as sly as a coiled snake. She's already got a rich wife picked out for him, and she will balk at nothing to gain her aim."

Myra shrank back from him. The revelation of his connection with George and his mother was too fresh to allow of a full flow of her sympathy, stricken with remorse though he was. He read her thoughts, and the shadows deepened in his eyes.

"I see," he groaned. "You don't think I've got any right to talk agin anybody, or plead anybody's cause? Well, I wouldn't if—if I could see any other way out."

"I must do my duty as I see it." Myra steadied her thin voice. "I have led Olin to think—to be—

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lieve that I will stick to him, and even if his mother does want to part us, why—well, I mustn't consider that. As for George, his religion and mine will always keep us apart. I don't believe God Himself would forgive a girl who—"

"Hush, hush!" Silas again clutched her knee with his talon-like hand. "What do you or me, or the wisest man that ever trod the earth, know about God, or what He wants? You needn't tell me that there is any fount of mercy and love and pity anywheres. Haven't I hunted for it? Haven't I tried everything on earth and above to get a thimbleful of it? In the hot, thoughtless blood of youth I went wrong; I crushed a young flower and watched it wilt year after year. If ever a man tried on earth to right a wrong I did; but every move I made only piled my sin up higher. The thing Olin and his gang say is so easy is all a fake. You and your sort may be washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, but it's because you don't have anything to wash off. Listen. Right now you have a chance to answer all my prayers. It is in your hands. If you was to reach out and help me, I'd believe that God had listened and acted. Yes, I would."

"I? What could I do?" Myra faltered, and avoided his fierce stare. The clutch on her knee tightened. The old man's jaw dropped and his beard shook.

"Why, it's this way," he declared. "I prayed for years that poor Jane would at least die easy, and you say she—she found peace."

"Yes, yes, she is in heaven," Myra answered.

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"Her death was glorious—it would convince any doubter on earth."

"Well then, *she's* at rest," Silas said. "But another life of misery has set in. George took it up where she left off. Fate is agin him, as it has been agin me and his mother. Life without you will be a living death to him. If—if he could get you—if you'd go to him, instead of blaming me, he'd bless the hour, black as it was, in which he was conceived. If—if you was to tell me now to go after George and fetch him back, them skies over us would blaze with God's forgiveness. So I ask *you* to have mercy. It is with *you* to lift me up or throw me down. I want George to have you. He's suffered enough, and I want to be the one to link you together. My God, child, pity me. Let me go after him."

"Oh, I can't, I can't!" Myra covered her face with her hands, and bent her head to her lap. "I am sorry for you, but it is settled. George and I must not meet again."

Silence fell between them, broken only by the harsh breathing of the old man. The tops of the trees stretching out toward the sun were gently waving. Bluebirds and tiny brown sparrows flitted from bough to bough or darted to the earth for their prey. Far above in the cloud-flecked blue four or five turkey buzzards were circling nearer and nearer to the carrion they had scented.

Presently the rumbling voice of the old man broke from his throat. He stood up, his gaunt frame a silhouette of despair against the sky. "I won't give up," he said. "I can't believe you will hold out agin him and me. You are too sweet and tender-

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hearted. Will you promise me to think it over till dinner? I could get to Funstown in time then. Will you do that much—just that much?”

“There is no use,” she began, as she stood beside him and gathered her skirt in her hand for the descent of the rock, but she said no more.

“Will you promise to meet me here after dinner and give your *final* decision?” Silas urged. “You can do that much; even if you don’t change your intentions, you can do that. Will you come?”

“I can’t see that it will do any good,” she said, slowly. “George and I thoroughly understand each other, and—and our parting last night was final.”

“Well, I’m going to stay right here and wait for you.” He laid a heavy hand on her shoulder. “I’ll wait, and wait. I don’t care how long it is. I ain’t going back home with this load on me. Maybe you don’t understand what I mean, but George would—he would, for he saw me desperate once, and that time wouldn’t hold a candle to this.”

“I’ve done all I can—said all I can,” she faltered, looking back upon him from the base of the rock. She was turning away. He stood erect, a grim figure against the sky, like the trunk of a storm-rent tree.

“No, you hain’t—no, you hain’t!” he cried. “You do as I say. You do it or you will be sorry for it. You will be sorry for it, I tell you. I’ll wait right here. You will come, too. You’ll think over what I’ve said and you’ll come.”


She was silent, and kept her face averted. He thought she shook her head, and that she muttered

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something to herself; but he was not sure. He saw her vanish in the wood down the hillside. He sank on the rock, clasped his slender knees in his arms, and groaned.

"She may, and she may not," he muttered in his beard. "Well, if she don't it will be over with me."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

HEN Mell had said good-by and left him in the hotel at Funstown, George went to his room and deposited his valise. It was a bare, cheerless chamber, with a single window which looked out on a dismal network of tracks in the railway switching - yard. He opened the morning paper which he had bought, but it failed to hold his attention. Finally he put it down; the close air of the room, after the invigorating drive through the mountains, was stifling, and he went out on the streets and began to stroll aimlessly about the town. Leaving the main business center, he soon found himself in the vicinity of the churches. Hardly conscious of the fact, he was looking for the one in which Olin was to preach. To his rural eye, when he came upon it, it was indeed an imposing structure. It stood on an ample plat of grass, and was of gray stone and pleasing architecture. Adjoining the church, and with grounds almost as spacious, stood the parsonage, a modern two-story house with wide verandas well supplied with plants and flowers. There was a hammock in one corner of the veranda, and in it sat two little golden-haired girls, the daughters of the resigning pastor. They were daintily dressed, and were nursing pretty dolls,



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to which they were singing as they swung back and forth, their slippered feet on the floor.

George walked on till he had turned the corner of the street. On the side of the house he saw the library, with its fine oriel window, and the glassed-in hothouse.

"My God!" the observer exclaimed, under his breath. "She will live there. She will be his wife—the mother of his children. She will become like the rest of her world. It will be her duty to forget me, and she will. It is said that all good women love the father of their children. She will forget, but I sha'n't—never while the sun shines. To the end of my life I'll hold her to me as I did that day on the mountain. To the end of my life I'll feel her arms around my neck, her willing kiss on my lips. You can't take that, Olin. It is mine, and shall be mine through eternity!"

His walk led him completely around the house, and he found himself again in front of the church. There were some iron benches under the trees of the churchyard, and he went to one and sat down. The place had an uncanny fascination for him. He told himself that he was on the spot that was to enshrine his love in the future. She would cross that bit of grass from the side door of the parsonage to reach the stair which led directly to the pulpit and choir-loft.

Suddenly his attention was attracted by the sound of horses' hoofs on the paved street, and a pair of blacks driven by a negro in a battered silk top-hat, and drawing a glittering phaeton, was reined in at the church porch. The occupants were three young

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ladies and two young men, and they all alighted. One of the young men held a bunch of keys.

"Hitch your horses, Larkin," he called out to the driver. "You've got to pump the organ. The water-power is cut off."

Jesting and laughing merrily, the party entered the church, and in a few minutes the mellow tones of the organ swelled out from the building. Into this blended the notes of a cornet and violin, which was followed by the clear, sweet voice of a soprano.

The heart of the listener ached. This was the life to which his half-brother would introduce his bride. Those young ladies and men would look up to her as the wife of their pastor. Her social position would be unquestioned, and, with her wonderful tact, grace, and sincerity, she would soon be loved by all. All at once the music became unbearable. His endurance of the grief upon him had reached its limit. Rising, he walked away. He had been torturing himself; he must cease that sort of thing, and prove himself the man she believed him to be. He had borne his misfortunes so far, and he must continue. He tried to summon to his aid fancies of the new life that was before him, but they were vague and evasive pictures on a curtain of grim despair. Try as he would he could not shake off the agony which had clutched him.

He passed the day in lonely brooding, now fighting manfully to gain supremacy over his black mood, again sinking into it, as if for relief which was not to be obtained. The afternoon was half gone. He was on his way to the railway station to buy his ticket, when happening to pass the wagon-yard,

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where the farmers left their teams, he suddenly ran upon Silas Dwight as the old man stood at the gate holding his horses, which were hitched to a buggy.

"I've been looking for you all over town," Silas said, tremulously and with a sheepish look. "I didn't know where you was. They told me you had left the hotel, and I was afraid you might have taken an early train. I want to see you, George—I just had to come. You may think I'm a troublesome old meddler, but I had to hitch up and drive over."

"Well, I'm glad you came," George said, sympathetically, wholly misunderstanding the old man's motive.

"George, listen; don't get mad and scold me. I can't help myself. I just had to do something. I'd 'a' died if I hadn't. I'd 'a' done the—the thing you kept me from doing that night if I hadn't seen some opening. George, I saw Myra after you left. She come on me by accident and found out what I am to you. I—I was praying, and she heard me. I took it on myself to talk to her about you. She wouldn't say a thing the first time, but later she come to me. She come and said she needed your advice, and needed it bad. Something seems to have come up. She wouldn't say what it was, but she is plumb upset and troubled. She said you was the only one who could tell her what to do. She said she wondered if you could put off your trip till to-morrow, and come back with me in my rig. I told her I didn't think your business out there was so urgent that you couldn't do that, and so I come to—to see you about it."

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"Of course I can go," George said, eagerly. "There is really no reason to hurry. The fact is, I learned to-day that the men I am to be associated with are both away from home, and will be for several weeks. Yes, yes, I can go."

"Well, I'm ready," Silas said, in a tone of vast relief. "My team is fresh now, and we'll go at a good gait."

"Then let's stop at the hotel," George said. "I want to pay my bill and get my valise."

## CHAPTER XXXVII



It was after nightfall when they reached the village. Leaving Silas at the old man's wagon-gate, George walked on to Chapman's house. Chapman sat on the front veranda smoking his pipe, and rose awkwardly as the young man came up the steps.

"Take a chair," he said. "Myra was here a minute ago, but she slipped away when she saw you coming. Her ma said she told her that she sent to Funstown after you. Well, I don't know how that was; but it's her business. I never was much of a hand to try to force young folks one way or another. How is it in town to-day? Heaps o' cotton rolling in, I reckon."

"A good deal, I think," George answered from his chair.

"You didn't inquire about the market, did you?" Chapman was stuffing fresh tobacco into his pipe and getting more at ease.

"No, I didn't ask. You see, I sold mine in the field."

"Yes, I know—that is, I heard you did, and that you made a good deal. Guessing at a crop o' anything is hard. I sent my cotton to the gin Friday. I'm going to have it compressed and hold it for a

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stiff price. There, I see Myra out in the yard. She's trying to tole you away from me. I reckon you'd as well go and see what she wants."

George went down the steps and crossed the grass to where Myra stood among the rose-bushes.

"I'm afraid you'll never forgive me," she began, as she gave him her hand, and the color rose so high in her face that it was discernible even in the twilight; "but it seemed to me to-day that I simply had to see you before—before you left. I have got in a sort of habit of relying on your advice, and I need it now worse than I ever did. George, I'm in trouble."

"I'm sorry," he said. "As for my coming back, that isn't anything. I'd have come a thousand miles to help you."

She glanced nervously toward the house, and seemed to breathe more freely when she saw her father had retired out of sight.

"Yes, I thought I had better see you," she went on, leading him across the grass to a rustic bench behind a hedge of untrimmed boxwood and sitting down. She drew her skirt close to her in mute invitation for him to sit beside her, and he did so wonderingly. "Then happening to hear that your—that Mr. Dwight was going, I spoke to him about it. He thought one day off of your time would not matter much, and so I asked you to come back."

"I'm certainly glad I saw him in time," George answered. "I should have been very unhappy to have left you in trouble if there was anything I could possibly do to aid you."

"Yes, I'm in trouble." Myra leaned her elbow

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on the back of the bench and regarded him almost shrinkingly, her color still raging in her face. "George, you knew I was trying to do my duty by—by Olin?"

"Yes," he groped, almost breathlessly, "I am sure of it."

"Well," she said, softly, as she cast her eyes down, "it looks like I shall not—that is, I mean—"

She seemed unable to proceed, and he could think of nothing to say that was at all adequate to a situation so obviously delicate.

"You mean—" he began—"that—" But he could say no more.

"I'll simply tell you about it," Myra said, "and you can then advise me as to what I ought to do. George, this morning when I was returning from an early walk up the hill I met Mrs. Dwight. I think she was out looking for me, for she stood at the gate till I came up. Then she said she wanted to talk to me. I always thought she was hard-hearted, but she proved it this morning. She didn't beat about the bush. She came right out and said that she was opposed to Olin's marrying me. She said he didn't know his own mind, and that she felt that it was her duty to prevent his making a mistake that he and I would regret all our lives. She said love, such as his and mine, was silly, and that a year from now he would see his mistake. She asked me straight out if I would not release him. It made me angry to be talked to like that, and I told her that the affair was between her son and me, and that she had nothing to do with it one way or another."

"I see, I see," George said, reflectively.

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"That made her very angry," Myra continued. "She raged like a mad woman. Her eyes flashed and her lips curled, and she clenched her hands and stamped her foot. She told me, to use her own words, that if I married her son it would be war to the knife between us. She said she would make my life miserable—that I was only taking him because he was rising in the world, and I wanted to benefit by his success. She said—she said I was a green country girl that was absolutely unfit for the life he was to take up—that he could marry a woman with money and position, and that her son simply should not make the mistake so many make when they are young."

"She ought to have been ashamed of herself," George said, studying the agitated face so close to his. "Well, what did she do then?"

"She almost shook her fist in my face, and opened the gate and went into the house, and I hurried on home nearly scared out of my senses. Olin was in his study at the time, for I had seen him at the window, and she must have gone straight to him. I don't know what she said to him, but she said something unusual, for in a few minutes he came over to see me. He was awfully pale, and was quivering from head to foot. He said he wanted to see me alone, and we went into the parlor. Then he asked me a straightforward question. I think she put him up to it. I tried to keep from answering, but he kept asking it over and over, till—till finally there was nothing to do but to tell him the truth."

Myra's voice had sunken low. She had folded her hands in her lap and looked at the ground.



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"Of course, of course," George said, aimlessly, as he groped for her meaning, and then he waited. He saw her breast rise and fall convulsively.

"George, he—Olin asked me if I loved—you more than I did him."

"Oh!" George cried, impulsively, and then was silent, still and breathless as he studied her warm profile.

"Yes, he asked me that." Myra turned a steady and frank gaze upon her companion. "And he made me answer. He *made* me. He was desperate. He caught hold of my wrists and held me, and forced me to look into his face. Then I told him the truth. George, I told him that I—loved you—loved you with all my soul and body, and that no matter who I married I'd love you to the end of my life."

They were gazing into each other's eyes now. George's face was ablaze, his very lips were throbbing with the blood of new life.

"You told him that," he breathed, rapidly, "*that?*"

"Yes, and he let my hands loose and sat down and cried like a child. Then he told me—he grew calmer—and told me that it was my duty to—to let you know the truth, and that he would release me from every obligation to him. He stood up before me while he was saying it, and I closed my eyes and prayed. George, I was so happy I felt like flying. I was praying that he would not take back what he'd said. I was afraid he might change his mind, and put it in some other form. I did not look at him for several minutes. I was thinking of

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your going so far off all alone when I wanted so much—so very much to go with you. That's all," she finished. "You said you loved me, and wanted me, and if you still do, I'll be your wife. George, I simply could not live apart from you. I've tried it for one day, and that convinced me. I'd have gone crazy if I had not sent for you."

He sat gazing into her eyes unable to speak. His arm was around her, and he drew her head to his shoulder. For several minutes neither spoke. Finally he said, "You will go with me, then?"

"Yes, I'll go. I forgot to tell you. Father heard Olin and me talking, and got mad and came in, and told him that he didn't want a daughter of his to marry a preacher, that he had had enough of all of them. He would have said more, but I stopped him."

"What would your father say to—"

"He is willing, George, and so is mother."

Happening to glance toward the front fence, he descried a figure leaning on it. "It's Mr. Dwight," Myra said. "Let's speak to him. I think I know what he wants."

Hand in hand, they crossed the grass to the mute form at the fence.

"Have you fixed it up?" Silas asked, anxiously.

"Yes, it is settled," Myra answered, with a smile.

The old man stared through the twilight, then he said: "Thank God—thank God! I know now that prayer is answered."

That was all. Lowering his head till the brim of his slouch hat obscured his eyes, he turned and shambled away.

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They stood looking after him till he had vanished in the darkness; then they started, arm in arm, to go into the house. At this moment they heard voices singing somewhere back of the house—

“There’s a land that is fairer than day,  
And by faith we can see it afar.”

“It is the Fox sisters — poor old souls!” Myra sighed. “Their religion is the one joy they have in life.”

“I hear a man’s voice,” George said.

“It is Olin’s,” Myra explained. “He was going there to-night. Nothing gives him so much pleasure as to comfort those helpless old women. George, I’m afraid his mother will spoil a good Christian in him. He is made for the thing he is doing now, but she—”

“And perhaps I shall spoil one in you,” George said, with a tentative smile.

“On the contrary, I think you have already *made* a better one of me,” she returned.

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